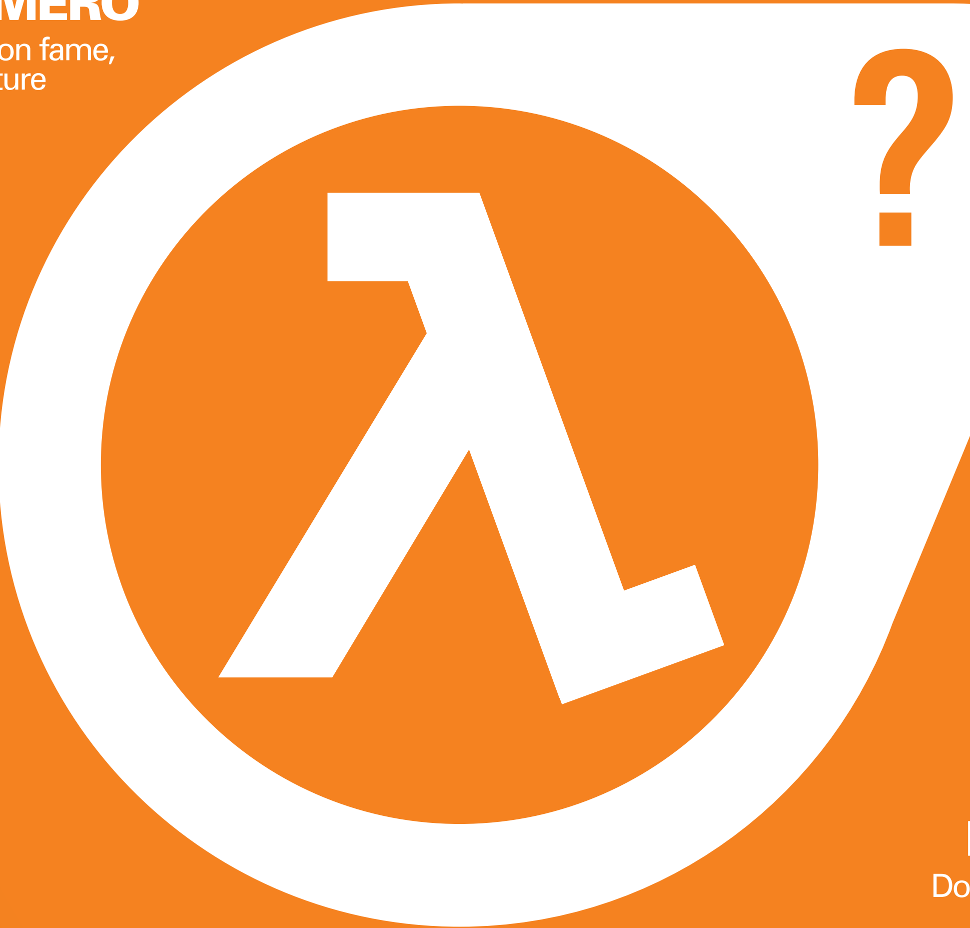
gamesTM

PS3 | Xbox 360 | Wii | PS2 | GC | Xbox | PC | GBA | PSP | DS | Arcade | Retro

INTERVIEW
JOHN ROMERO
The FPS veteran on fame, failure and the future



REVIEWED
DEAD RISING
Does Capcom's 360 blood-fest live up to the hype?

HALF-LIFE®
The saga continues…

HIGHLIGHTS
GAMESTM BIBLE GUIDE TO RPGs [FEATURE] THE END OF E3 [FEATURE] KANE & LYNCH [MULTI] JUST CAUSE [MULTI] SAINTS ROW [360] TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED [360] STARFOX COMMAND [DS] DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC [PC] TONY HAWK'S PROJECT 8 [MULTI] MEDIEVAL II [PC]


eMag

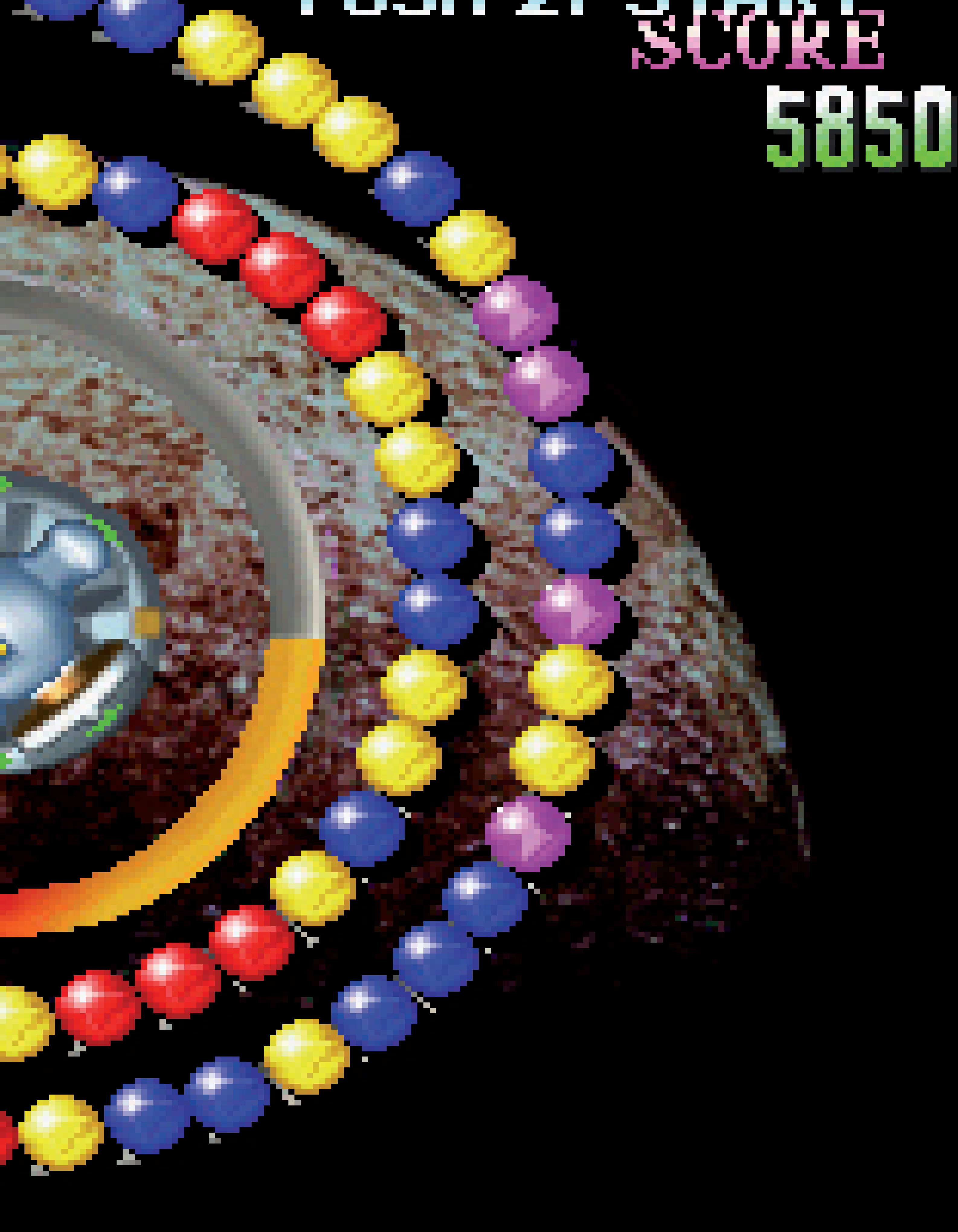
You may be wondering why *Half-Life 2* is gracing the front cover this month. You may also be curious as to why we have decided to suddenly – and unexpectedly – devote so much coverage to a landmark game that we appeared to controversially shun in the way of significant preview coverage and also chose not to review. And you're entitled to an answer. Last year, forums exploded with rage, disgust and above all confusion as to *Half-Life 2*'s omission from **games™**. Complicated delays with review code were behind the team's decision not to review the game when it was released on PC. A mistake? Yes, but that's all water under the bridge now. So, with Dr Freeman due to ring in the new year in high-definition PS3 and 360 glory – plus *Episode Two* episodic content simultaneously hitting PC – we saw this as an excellent opportunity to correct the mistakes of the past (p178), to celebrate the content of the present (p76) and to look ahead to what the future will bring "the Freeman" within the world of *Half-Life*. And with *Team Fortress* 2 and *Portal* to be implanted within the *Half-Life* universe, there are exciting times ahead for Valve, for **games™** and indeed most importantly, for you. Enjoy the issue…

Paul Morgan

Paul Morgan
Editor




LEVEL
48
LEVEL UP


SCORE
5850

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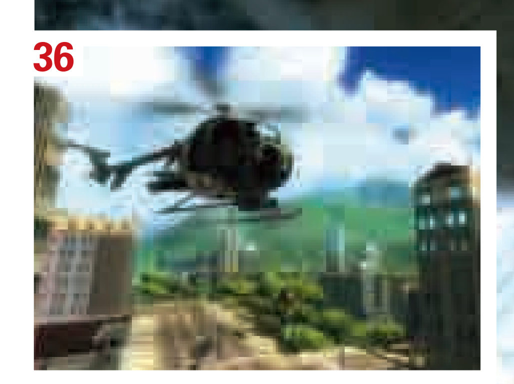
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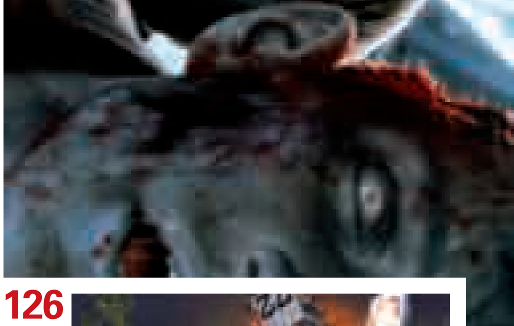
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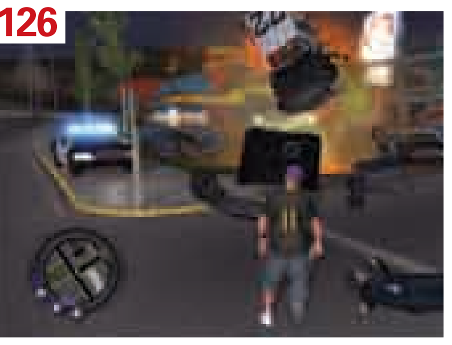
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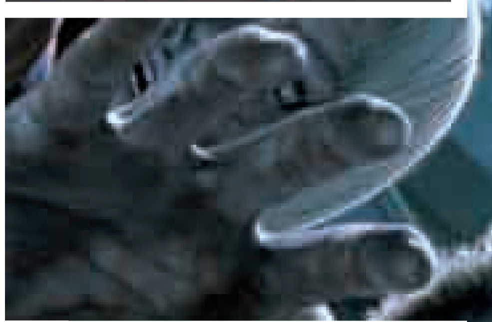
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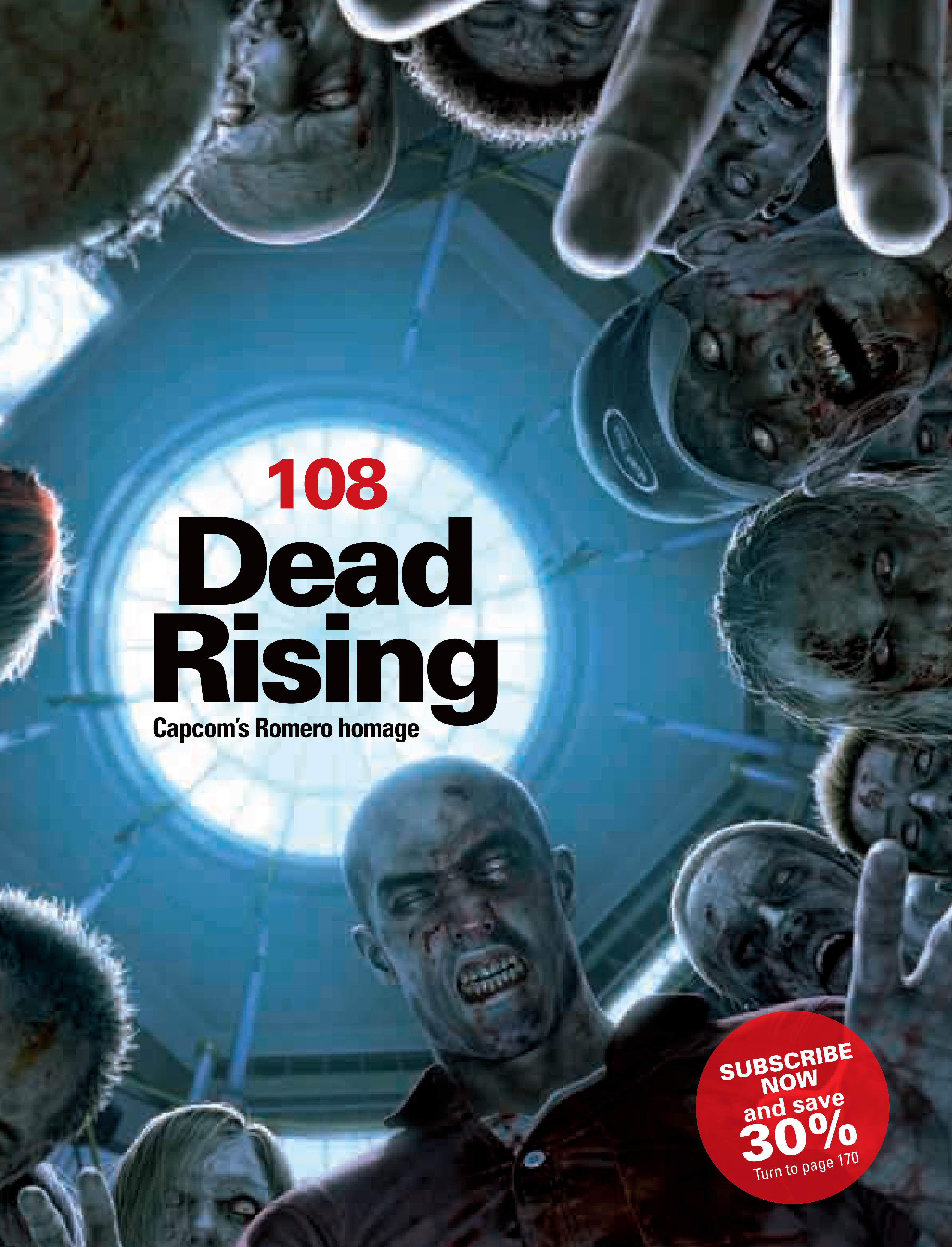



126





142


108
Dead Rising
Capcom's Romero homage
SUBSCRIBE NOW
and save
30%
Turn to page 170

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FIND OUT WHERE TO GET THE ESSENTIAL STORIES WITH OUR QUICK GUIDE TO THE NEWS

ON THE RISE

NINTENDO'S FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT AS PUBLISHERS CONTINUE TO BACK Wii

As we write, Nintendo is gearing up for the Leipzig Games Convention and the first concrete details concerning Wii's release date, price and specifications. And what better time? The firm is gaining supporters from every corner of gaming at the moment as news of PS3's hefty price tag reverberates around the industry like an LA earthquake.

Both Gearbox and LucasArts have confirmed their support for Wii, with Gearbox head honcho Randy Pitchford explaining that his firm is, "enthusiastically supporting the Wii. The strengths of Nintendo Wii include the price, the unique interface, the sure-bet library of games based on the great Nintendo properties and the promised back catalogue of classic games from Nintendo and others they have partnered with".

Considering the main complaint levelled at both N64 and GameCube was their lack of third-party support, it's an extremely promising sign for the future of Wii. As well as Gearbox and LucasArts, Ubisoft's heavy presence for Wii's launch will be crucial to the machine's success in the West. The French publishing giant is promising an incredible seven titles for launch. *Red Steel* and *Rayman Raving Rabbids* have been well publicised, but it's the announcement that Wii will play host to *Far Cry* and *Blazing Angels*, along with *Monster 4X4 World Circuit* and *GT Pro Series* that has really cemented Ubisoft's commitment to the new platform.

"We don't have a crystal ball but we think the Wii is going to be a huge success right away and we want to be the number-one independent publisher for Wii in 2006," predicts Laurent Detoc, Ubisoft's North American president. To have a publisher as huge as Ubisoft in your corner is great news for Nintendo. It would seem that innovation really is making waves within the industry, helped no end by the runaway success of DS.

It seems DS's influence may even permeate Nintendo's global strategy, with strong rumours that Wii's software will be region free. NoA's Perrin Kaplan kept her cards close to her chest regarding the issue, but hinted at a possible region-free future, "Clearly, the success of Nintendo DS has offered a lot of lessons about what works in the marketplace, and we certainly intend to keep our fans satisfied… the region-free approach has proved to be a successful and attractive feature for Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection on Nintendo DS". Nothing concrete, then, but an indication that Nintendo is definitely basing its Wii business model on the DS – which is a good thing, we're sure you'll agree.

THE N WORD

LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT WHAT ELSE NINTENDO HAS COMING UP…

OFFICIAL DS HEADSET

Nintendo is finally to release the official microphone/earphone DS headset in Japan on 14 September. We've seen a number of third-party equivalents on the market, but as is most often the case, the first-party offering sees superior build quality over the likes of Datel's set. With Nintendo Wi-Fi connection continuing to grow, games such as *Metroid Prime Hunters* and *Tony Hawk's American Sk8land* can now be played to their full potential with the headset that mimics a Nathan Barley-style Bluetooth headset – rather than the 360-style Datel effort – and comes in a very sleek 'cocaine' white. It's still not going to make you look cool when you're yelling at a Nintendog on a bus, but it's a lovely piece of kit nonetheless.

The DS headset is on its way! But will it make it to UK shores?

TRAUMA CENTER: SECOND OPINION

Undoubtedly one of the games that really shows off the unique qualities of DS, the original *Trauma Center* was an unmitigated critical success. The news that Wii will arrive at the same time as the game's sequel is fantastic news. Considering how much success Atlus had with the stylus as surgery tool in the original, the potential for Wii-remote scalpel action is immense. Perhaps using one hand to cut, and the other hand to control a suction tube, or even using both parts of the Wii nunchuck as a defibrillator. This is exactly what Nintendo needs for Wii – gaming experiences you simply cannot have on 360, PS3 or PC. If *Trauma Center: Second Opinion* is demoed in retail outlets at the time of the machine's launch, we can see non-gamers lapping up the rather unique take on the medium.

Next-gen surgery? Sounds like a good night in to us.

"WE THINK THE Wii IS GOING TO BE **A HUGE SUCCESS** RIGHT AWAY"

LAURENT DETOC, PRESIDENT, UBISOFT NORTH AMERICA

PRICING STRATEGY

Given the extortionate prices gamers are expected to pay for 360 software, and with PS3 set to follow suit, the sound of the words, "I cannot imagine any first-party titles could be priced for more than $50", from Nintendo president Saturo Iwata is music to our ears, and everyone else's no doubt. He later stated that he would have no control over the pricing of any third-party titles, but we'd be amazed if any other publishers chose to effectively price themselves out of the market.

This is further confirmation that Nintendo is not taking this generation lightly, and has firm intentions to move back towards the top of the heap that it once stood proudly upon. It will be fascinating to see where each of the three companies' fortunes lie 12 months from now – we certainly think Nintendo will be in a stronger position than it has been for years.

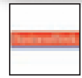


Nintendo's fair prices could leave you with money left over.

DATA STREAM

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BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



PULLING RANK?

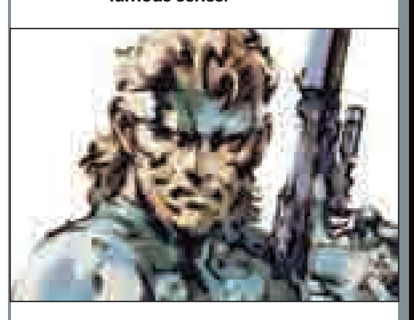
Whereas Nintendo might have lost its crown as the premier purveyor of games to Sony and Microsoft in recent years, it's still the only gaming-specific brand to reach the world's top one hundred earning brands, holding the middle ground at number 51 according to *BusinessWeek*. Sony is ranked at number 26 and Microsoft has claimed the number two spot for 2006. But while both companies have been bolstered by their stake in the games market, games represent a smaller factor in their positions than their other interests.

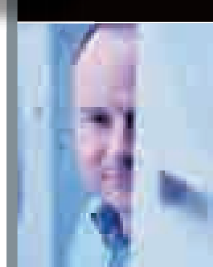




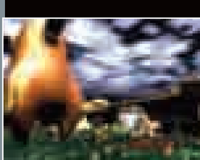
A SOLID LEVEL

Hideo Kojima – renowned developer and creator of *Metal Gear Solid*'s protagonist Solid Snake – has been lined up to design Snake's level in *Super Smash Bros* for Nintendo's Wii. *Super Smash Bros'* traditional Brawl mode features themed levels for each of the game's characters and the enduring title has expanded its base of characters over the years. Although it's not yet certain exactly what Snake's level will contain, with Kojima guiding its creation we're sure to experience a level that's strongly reminiscent of the famous series.





■ Revolution's Charles Cecil has recently spoken out against the huge size of the teams that are now employed by top-tier publishers.



■ Low-budget successes like *Darwinia* could soon become a thing of the past.



RELIC BOSS SPEAKS OUT AGAINST SPIRALLING COSTS

UNDER SIEGE

High-definition visuals. Razor-sharp sound. Open worlds. Things we take for granted as the next generation becomes the norm. However, the blockbusting games and intense experiences come at a high price, and the game industry may have to re-examine the way it does business.

The Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union (BECTU) is becoming concerned that an increasingly demanding industry is forcing game developers to work long hours in unsuitable conditions, raising fears that many newcomers will be burned out by the pressure. In a recent interview with the BBC, BECTU's spokesperson, Gerry Morrissey, claimed that it was increasingly common for developers to work 12-16 hours a day, several months at a time. Gareth Wilson of Bizarre Creations has also noticed the practice in other companies, commenting, "The industry can take young, green people, put them through the mill and spit them out… Some companies have forced staff to work long hours because they can get away with it".

With so much of the industry forced to aspire to the high end of gaming, smaller companies in particular are struggling to keep up with spiralling budgets and workforces. The independent sector is now more marginal than it has ever been. In a recent interview, Ron Moravek of Relic Entertainment expressed concern over the rising costs of development. Relic arrived on the scene with the relatively low-budget *Homeworld* in 1999, but Moravek believes that such a move will soon no longer be possible. "*Homeworld* was made for $2.1/$2.2 million, something like that. You look at today's games where they're costing between $10 and $20 million… and it's like, how would you do that as an independent? It's so, so difficult… On *Homeworld* we had 22 people at the max; on *Company Of Heroes* we've got a hundred."

One emerging source of extra income is in-game advertising. Codemasters has recently

signed a deal with IGA Worldwide to use real advertising in a number of key titles, the latest in a string of publishers who are turning to the practice for extra revenue. Codemasters CEO Rod Cousens said, "Advertising in games generates additional revenue that publishers can offset against product development costs". There is a commitment to ensuring that the adverts do not compromise the experience of the game, but if costs continue to rise and the practice becomes much more commonplace, then we could start to see the sort of blatant plugs and product placement that already litter the worst commercial films and television.

■ Relic's first release, *Homeworld*, was a far cry from the big budgets the company now commands.

CANCELLED PS3 GAME

NOT ANOTHER...

WHAT HAS SONY DONE WRONG?

It's been a rough few months for former undisputed industry king, Sony. Public opinion has drastically waned over PlayStation3 due to delays, misinformation and a staggering price point, and slowly but surely the industry itself seems to be losing faith in the most powerful home console the world has ever known.

From Software has announced that *Dark RPG* and *Black Blade*, both announced as PlayStation3 titles at the 2005 Tokyo Game Show, have been scrapped. Now, it isn't like these games were certain world-beaters, but fledgling platforms need all the games they can get and From's offerings are just the latest in a list of titles to get the axe. IGN deduced that the initially impressive *Killing Day* is no more, while the lower development costs of Xbox 360 have seen *Alan Wake*, *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*, *Oblivion*, *SmackDown '07*, *Condemned: Criminal Origins*, *Theseis* and *Elveon* all abandon proposed PlayStation3 versions.

With several developers also wanting to hold off on anything for the new console until next year, Sony-slapping has become something of a cause célèbre. It may well have been folly to develop a machine that required so much of anybody daring to make a game for it, but we strongly suspect that we, and basically everyone else, will still lust after one when it finally arrives.



DATA STREAM

DOWNLOADING... 40%

BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



ENCHIEVE-LMENTS

It's become apparent that what you 'achieve' in an Xbox 360 Live game, you will become 'entitled' to in a PS3 online game. So what if there's little distinction between the words? After Dual-Shock Wii-mote functionality, it seemed inevitable Sony would furnish its recently revealed robust online service with unlockable online extras. Considering how derivative of the 360 and Wii the PS3 is becoming, we think Nintendo and Microsoft should be pleased. After all, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.





NINTENDON'T

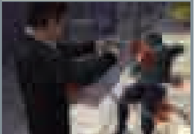
It was at best amusing the first time round. After an intense few weeks of speculative analysis of Nintendo press releases by fans in an effort to glean information as to the release date of the Wii, Nintendo made a tongue-in-cheek statement that parodied these attempts. Then another. And another. Several hackneyed jokes later and Nintendo's hammered out another clanger, with its fourth-quarter release revealing no new information and suggesting fans 'pore over it' and 'debate phraseology and comma placement'. It's new PR: annoy potential customers into buying your products.







Almost banned in Germany and censored in Japan, the brutal *Dead Rising*.



Images such as this are not very popular in Yorkshire, it would seem.

BLOODY MINDED

WILL THE VIOLENT VIDEOGAMES DEBATE EVER END?

After news surfaced this month that Eidos' forthcoming *Reservoir Dogs* game is already banned in Australia and New Zealand, we find ourselves knee deep in yet another 'violence in videogames' debate. A particularly provocative article appeared in the *Yorkshire Post* this month, entitled, "Chorus of outrage at video game violence" and featuring the opinions of local MPs and the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) concerning the supposedly evil game based on Tarantino's movie of the same name.

One Yorkshire MP claimed, "The game encouraged people to act in the same brutal way as the killers of PCs Sharon Beshenivsky and Ian Broadhurst, two West Yorkshire police officers recently gunned down in the line of duty", and yes, *Reservoir Dogs* does indeed encourage players to spray bullets liberally into authority figures, but it's also a game that is far less violent than, say, *Manhunt*, or indeed any number of 18-rated titles. There needs to be a line drawn between the following notions: games asking players to carry out actions themselves in the real world, which is a fallacy, and the fact that they actually ask players to command an on-screen avatar to carry out such actions within a fictional space.

The BBFC seems to agree. A spokeswoman speaking about *Reservoir Dogs* states, "It contains nothing that is particularly stronger than things found in most 18-rated games". Also, after mild controversy surrounding *Dead Rising*'s content, the BBFC has chosen to release the game completely uncut in this territory, with another spokesperson explaining, "There is no clear evidence that playing games leads to copycat behaviour. We would only intervene if a game was going further than any other game". A clear head in a sea of propaganda and hysteria. It certainly makes a refreshing change.

The truth is, no matter what content a game chooses to leave in or take out – and it's the same with all other artforms, be it literature, comedy or film – someone will be offended. Sadly, games have become the video nasties of the new millennium, and the constant bad press has shaped many opinions in the West. It's encouraging to hear the BBFC coming out in support of the medium – it certainly means consumers will not be let down when it comes to choice. In a few years, the whole debate will have died a death and the right wing will have found something else to worry about. Until then, we just have to sit it out.

"CONSTANT BAD PRESS HAS SHAPED MANY OPINIONS IN THE WEST"



CHIEF ENCOUNTER

BUNGIE LIKELY TO ANNOUNCE NEW IP AT X06

Creator of all things Master Chief, the Washington-based Bungie Studios is set to announce a brand new intellectual property at this year's X06 gathering in Barcelona. According to Eric Nylund, the writer of *Halo: The Fall Of Reach* and *Gears Of War*'s scriptwriter, Microsoft is hard at work on a new project.

"What am I working on next?" says Nylund, "Well, if you took all the best parts of your favourite games, and smashed them together at light speed with your favourite movies and books, you'd get something close to this." Nothing like a bit of hyperbole to get the hype machine started, is there?

This comes on the back of news that the *Halo* movie has finally been assigned a director with Peter Jackson hand picking South African helmer Neill Blomkamp to oversee the project. Blomkamp, a newcomer to Hollywood, is famous for his work on the Citroën-Alive commercials and the superb short film *Alive In Joburg*, which can be seen on YouTube in all its glory.

Should Blomkamp maintain *Alive In Joburg*'s gritty urban look for the *Halo* movie, we could be in for a real treat come summer 2008.

GAMES ROOM 101

THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF VIDEOGAMING

NO. 48: VIDEOGAME LOGIC

As we move headlong into what should surely now be called the 'current generation', the old videogame logic bugbear has raised its ugly head once more. As games get ever closer to the holy grail of photorealism, being asked to perform ridiculous and out-of-context tasks is all the more jarring.

Case in point: *Tomb Raider: Legend*. Why is there a forklift truck in the middle of Arthur's tomb? Why do you have to swing a chandelier into a bell to steal Excalibur? For a game that takes itself incredibly seriously in its overblown cut-scenes, suddenly asking players to carry out these ludicrous activities shatters verisimilitude completely. It's the gaming equivalent of dialogue that only acts as a device to move the plot along. It's gaming for gaming's sake.

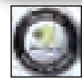
If game developers are so insistent on telling complex and 'emotional' stories, then the games have to make sense contextually. In time, with better script writing and a greater understanding of the videogame language, it will come, but for now it's back to the forklift truck.



DATA STREAM

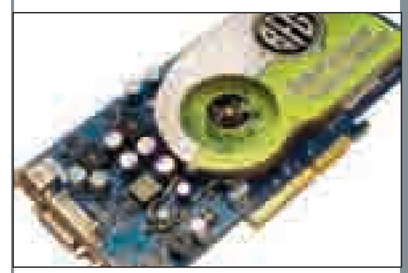
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BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



NEXT-GEN HI-DEF

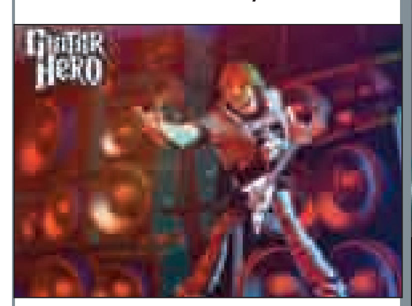
The brain behind PSP hit *Lumines* said recently that high-def visuals could have a similar impact on games that 3D had over a decade ago. Speaking at the Game Developers Conference, Tetsuya Mizuguchi said, "The resolution games use will deliver a very high emotional impact." Mizuguchi also suggested that network and pay-per-download games could replace retail in as little as a decade, "I also expect everyone will be using hard disk in the future so that downloading something will be very normal."





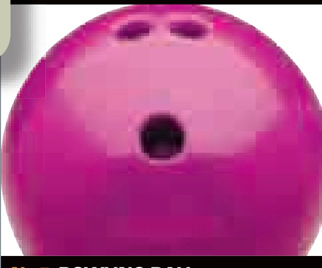
HERO TRIO

RedOctane, publisher of Harmonix's gaming pandemic *Guitar Hero* that touched even the lives of genre-mired fanboys, has announced three brand new tracks for the forthcoming sequel. With the promise of more addictive faux-guitar but with a few tweaks and more glam, *Guitar Hero II* will include Stone Temple Pilot's *Trippin' On A Hole In A Paper Heart*, Anthrax's *Madhouse* and Mötley Crüe's *Shout At The Devil*. *Guitar Hero II* is slated for a US Christmas release but we probably won't see the PAL version until early 2007.





DEAD RISING WEAPONS



No.5 BOWLING BALL
If only it came with a skittles sound effect



No.4 CHAINSAW
Chainsaws in games are always good



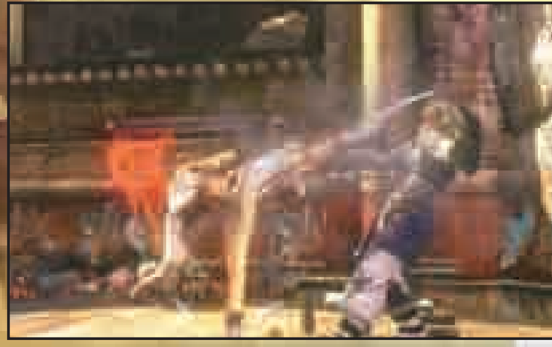
No.3 FRISBEE
Watch it bounce off their undead heads



No.2 SHOWER HEAD
Jam it in their cranium and blood will flow



No.1 KATANA
Ideal for crowd management – brutal too



Will images such as this from *Heavenly Sword* be enough to ensure the PS3's success?

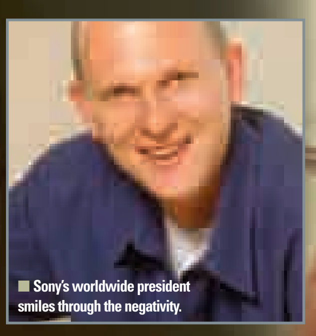
SONY STORIES

CONFLICTING INDUSTRY OPINION SURROUNDS PS3 HYPE MACHINE

It would seem PS3 is not experiencing the smooth run up to launch that many had predicted when those first *Killzone* images surfaced in 2005. In fact, despite the protestations of Sony's worldwide president Phil Harrison, many in the industry are approaching the new PlayStation platform with caution.

Overseas marketing manager for SNK Playmore Yoshihito Koyama has spoken out about his firm's stance on PS3. "My first impression is that it's expensive," he told gaming blog Kotaku, "PlayStation2 is good enough. It's small and cheap". Hardly music to Sony's ears, is it? "There won't be enough consoles at launch. Few consoles mean few software sales. We need to wait three or four years. Maybe 2009-2010 is a good time to release a game for the PS3," Koyama continued.

These sentiments have been echoed by Atari CEO Bruno Bonnell who has confirmed that there will be no Atari PS3 games until 2007. "I think that by deciding to put PS3 at this price, Sony has chosen to really differentiate itself from the other consoles," he told gamesindustry.biz, "It's just that we're lacking information about PS3 at this stage, because we have basically a rough release date and a high retail price point. As far as the Wii and the Xbox 360 go, we'll be there for this season; for PS3, we'll probably have to wait a little later in the year before we release some new titles."



Sony's worldwide president smiles through the negativity.

However, Harrison has said that over 10,000 development kits have been shipped to studios, and one hundred PS3 games are currently in development. "Developers now have final hardware in their hands," he explained in an interview with the *Guardian*. "The new controller is now in developers' hands, so all the pieces of the puzzle are there."

A comment later in the month seemed to contradict Sony's commitment to Blu-ray though, when Harrison stated, "I'd be amazed if the PS4 had a physical disc drive". Although it's far too early to be discussing PS4, we can't help but think that such a statement can only damage Sony's reputation.

Of course, it's the games that speak for themselves, and if PS3 can produce an output of the same calibre as PS2's, then the machine has a strong chance of success.



■ Will we be saluting the sleek new PlayStation come November? We hope to God we will.

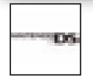
"DEVELOPERS NOW HAVE THE FINAL **HARDWARE IN THEIR HANDS.** THE NEW CONTROLLER IS NOW IN DEVELOPERS' HANDS, SO **ALL THE PIECES OF THE PUZZLE** ARE THERE"

PHIL HARRISON, WORLDWIDE PRESIDENT, SONY

DATA STREAM

DOWNLOADING COMPLETE

BITE-SIZED STORIES FROM AROUND THE WORLD OF GAMING



DS REGRESS

DS continues in its mission to truly encompass the mass-market by announcing its latest game, *42 All-Time Classics*. On 29 September, you can get 42 board and parlour games on Nintendo DS for a comparative snip at £20. Games include Black Jack, I doubt it, Texas Hold 'Em, Checkers, Backgammon and Chess. Most of the games are Wi-Fi enabled, so you can take on all the pensioners in your neighbourhood who bought a DS in June for *Brain Training*, then get whupped at old-school classics like *Old Maid*.





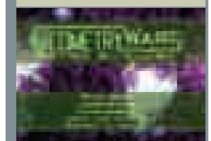
CLASSROOM PLAYTIME

It's official: the majority of 11-to-16-year-old UK students are in favour of using videogames as an educational aid. (Shock.) A survey conducted among 2,300 pupils by Ipsos MORI as a part of the Teaching With Games project, confirmed that 66 per cent of 11 year olds favoured using videogames in classrooms. (Horror.) The project is supported by EA, Microsoft and TakeTwo. (Unbelievable.) In fact, the only really surprising fact this survey uncovered is that two in five of these pupils were actually against the idea. Now *that's* news.





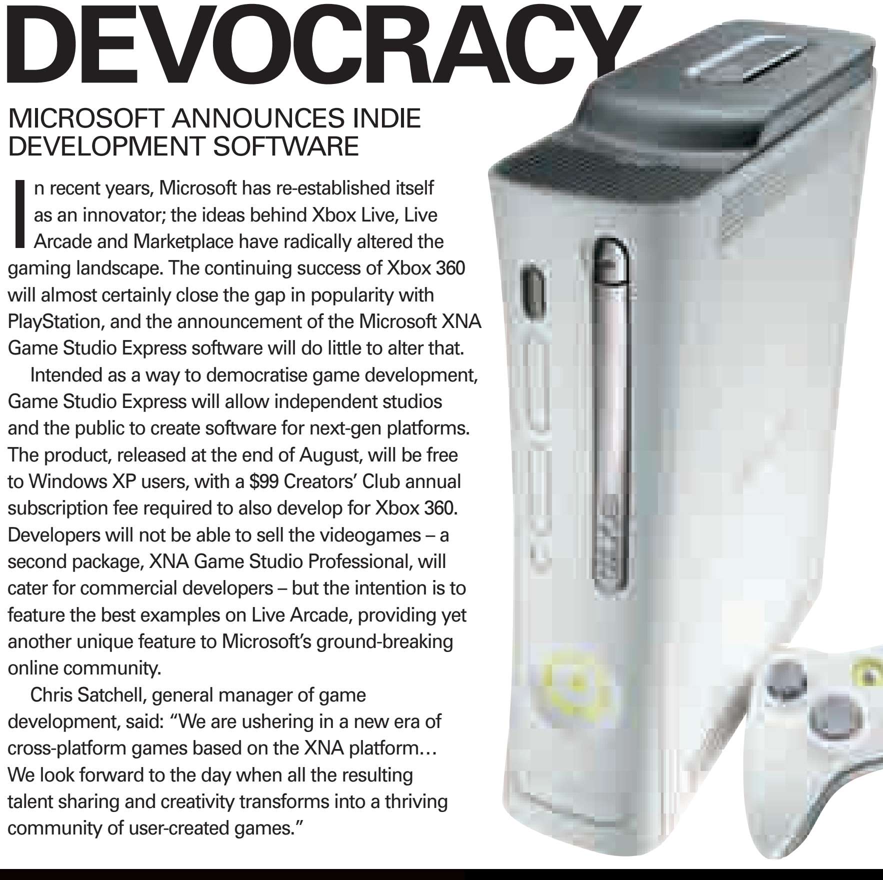

The software will be available free to PC users with Windows XP.



The resulting games could take their place alongside *Geometry Wars* on Live Arcade.

DEVOCRACY

MICROSOFT ANNOUNCES INDIE DEVELOPMENT SOFTWARE



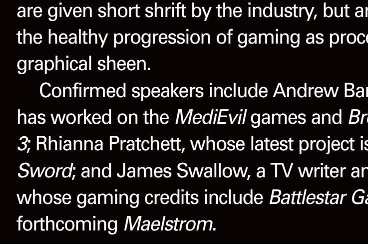
In recent years, Microsoft has re-established itself as an innovator; the ideas behind Xbox Live, Live Arcade and Marketplace have radically altered the gaming landscape. The continuing success of Xbox 360 will almost certainly close the gap in popularity with PlayStation, and the announcement of the Microsoft XNA Game Studio Express software will do little to alter that.

Intended as a way to democratise game development, Game Studio Express will allow independent studios and the public to create software for next-gen platforms. The product, released at the end of August, will be free to Windows XP users, with a $99 Creators' Club annual subscription fee required to also develop for Xbox 360. Developers will not be able to sell the videogames – a second package, XNA Game Studio Professional, will cater for commercial developers – but the intention is to feature the best examples on Live Arcade, providing yet another unique feature to Microsoft's ground-breaking online community.

Chris Satchell, general manager of game development, said: "We are ushering in a new era of cross-platform games based on the XNA platform… We look forward to the day when all the resulting talent sharing and creativity transforms into a thriving community of user-created games."



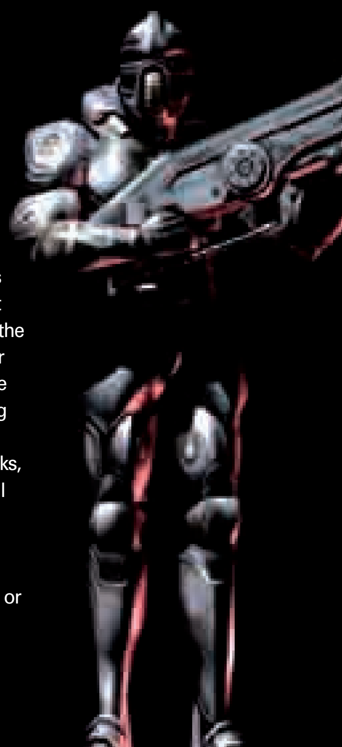
Maelstrom is written by James Swallow, a seasoned TV writer and novelist.



Beyond Good & Evil is an example of character and story making the game.

WAR OF WORDS

BAFTA EXAMINES WRITING IN VIDEOGAMES



In a bid to reassert its belief in videogames as an art-form equivalent to film or television, BAFTA, in conjunction with the Writers Guild Of Great Britain, is holding a forum on the future of game narrative. Held at the Princess Anne Theatre in London on 11 September, the forum will, "Cover hot topics such as integrating a writer into the audio development process, interactive narrative structures, and the role of dialogue engines. The evening will look at the future of writing in games."

So far the next generation has been largely about looks, but as games become larger and more real the story will necessarily have to improve. The maturation of story, character and narrative concerns integral to other media are given short shrift by the industry, but are as vital for the healthy progression of gaming as processing power or graphical sheen.

Confirmed speakers include Andrew Barnabas, who has worked on the *MediEvil* games and *Broken Sword 3*; Rhianna Pratchett, whose latest project is *Heavenly Sword*; and James Swallow, a TV writer and novelist whose gaming credits include *Battlestar Galactica* and the forthcoming *Maelstrom*.


eMag



THE PEOPLE IN THE GAMES INDUSTRY TELL IT LIKE IT IS…

WHAT'S THE STORY, MOVIES AND GAMES?



Are all developers just frustrated movie directors? A slew of recent games has helped the notion grow inside me, and now it's too strong to shake. There has always been a crossover between the audiences of cinema and videogames, but has the accessibility of our industry begun to act as a safety net for those to whom Hollywood seemed a little too far off?

At a recent product demonstration, I was taken aback by how vehemently the development team was pushing the story and characters. They were so important, I was told, that even the gameplay and level design were subservient to them. It is a curious and utterly impossible stance to take when making a game. To my mind, these people are in the wrong industry.

It happened again shortly after. Another great looking, engaging title, and all the developer talked of was the struggle for emotional realism and humanist truth. Noble sentiments, but all they'd done was slap some over-long cinematic cut-scenes between the levels. They looked good, but when they ended I was still playing a videogame, and not a scrap of emotion had been stirred.

I'd never forsake anyone for wanting more from their medium, but is borrowing techniques from cinema really going to achieve that? Regardless of plots, characters and scripts, there will always be an interactive level stuck in the middle, and that, for me at least, sucks the emotion out every time. Why not glorify what games do best – a sentiment that Nintendo and I share – rather than aspire to be second fiddle? If half the people struggling to copy the language of film put their efforts into creating a unique language for videogames, we'd all be better off. And so would our game collections.

Mr X knows he's right. One day you will know it too.

FROM THE FRONT

CONSUMER ELECTRONICS UP SONY'S PROFITS, THQ EXPECTS TO PERFORM WELL, AND UBISOFT IS OPTIMISTIC ABOUT DRIVER

NEVER SAY DIE

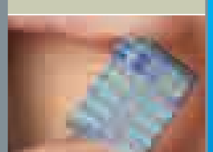
SONY POSTS PROFITS AS GAME DIVISION SUFFERS

After a long time in the financial wilderness, and with public opinion on the forthcoming PlayStation3 cooling rapidly, Sony might just be able to make out a light at the end of the tunnel. This light has very little to do with its performance in the videogame sector, but a surge of interest in its movie and consumer electronics divisions – flat-screen televisions in particular – has seen Sony post profits of around £150 million for the quarter ending 30 June. Sony, which recorded a loss in the same quarter last year, also saw a year-on-year revenue increase of 11 per cent to around £8 billion.

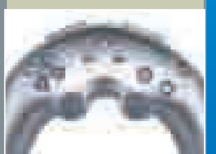
The videogame division, however, recorded large operating losses, due in no small part to the escalating development costs for PlayStation3, causing revenues to plummet by nearly 30 per cent. As expected, console and game sales for PlayStation2 continued to drop, and so too did sales of PSP as it continues to suffer in the growing shadow of Nintendo's DS.



With the launch of PlayStation3 mere months away, optimists are predicting a new beginning for Sony. However, with the movie division relying heavily on the success of Blu-ray, and the Cell processor set to be incorporated into a range of consumer electronics hardware, the failure of its next-generation console could have ramifications far beyond the boundaries of the videogame division, possibly affecting the stability and financial welfare of the entire Sony organisation. No pressure.



Sony's Cell processor chip has proved costly, making its success essential.



Setbacks like the U-turn on controller design have weakened the public's belief.

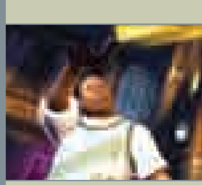
DRIVING FORCE

MOVIE LICENCE COMPENSATES FOR FIRST-QUARTER LOSS

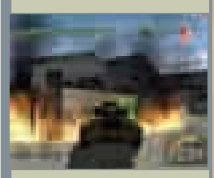
While *Cars* looks set to be the least satisfying Pixar film to date, THQ's videogame tie-in is the driving force behind the publisher's sales figures. Quarterly sales revenue was, as imagined, down on the same period last year, but at $138 million, it still came in above the forecasted amount. Increased operating costs dragged profits down, resulting in a net loss of $12.1 million for the quarter ending 30 June, compared to $4 million dollars the year before.

THQ CEO Brian Farrell commented, "With the roll-out of *Cars* overseas and the launch of our key brands on next-generation hardware, we expect to outperform the market in what is widely viewed as a transition year for the industry". Financial analyst Michael Pachter who claimed the THQ balance sheet was in "excellent shape" corroborated the stance.

The California-based publisher has a number of prestigious titles still to be released this year, including *Company Of Heroes*, *Saints Row* and various titles for the WWE, Nickelodeon and Disney/Pixar licences. Couple that with the recently completed takeover of Paradigm Entertainment – home of *Stuntman* – and loss or no loss, THQ seems to be surviving the generation crossover better than most.



Saints Row leads an impressive THQ line-up for the rest of the year.



Through buying Paradigm, THQ has laid its hands on the lucrative *Stuntman* franchise.


eMag

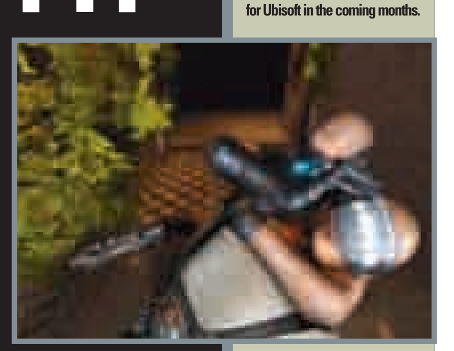
FIGHTING FIT

UBISOFT CLAIMS CLASSIC FRANCHISE IN LUCRATIVE YEAR

Surviving a transition between technologies is all about embracing the new – or at least that's what Ubisoft will tell you after attributing its staggering 62 per cent rise in revenue to its commitment to next-generation platforms. With the figure just south of £50 million for the quarter, the numbers are a huge increase on the company's predictions.

The success of next-gen titles like *Heroes Of Might & Magic* on PC and *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* on Xbox 360 were responsible for 85 per cent of the total sales. Ubisoft predicts a further revenue increase for the next quarter with *Pirates Of The Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* and *Enchanted Arms* expected to do good business and prestige titles like *Splinter Cell: Double Agent* and *Red Steel* propping up the numbers as the year goes on.

Further growth is expected through the recent acquisition of the *Driver* franchise. After a cluster of lacklustre efforts, Ubisoft will bring the classic series into the next generation. Yves Guillemot, CEO, stated, "*Driver* is a mythic brand that has already sold more than 14 million units around the world. This striking acquisition allows us to enter the driving game segment, one of the most important in the game industry."



Splinter Cell: Double Agent is likely to provide more success for Ubisoft in the coming months.



The *Driver* franchise will pave the way for a move into the driving-game market.

WE LOVE Wii

EA CONFIRMS SUPPORT FOR NINTENDO

Demonstrations of Nintendo's latest console have turned a fair few heads, not least those at industry giant Electronic Arts. During a conference call, EA executives claimed that, "We have ramped up production for the Wii and DS Lite," and there is a growing belief that Nintendo's software could be the ultimate winner in the next-gen war.

New instalments in the *Need For Speed* and *Madden* series will be ready for Wii's launch, with EA saying that games will cost around $50 in the US. EA's sports games are uniquely placed to take advantage of Wii's motion-sensitive control method, and support from such an influential publisher will surely give Nintendo reason to be cheerful.



TRIUMPH OR DISASTER? GAMES™ INVESTIGATES THE SHOCKING DEMISE OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST VIDEOGAME SHOW



The feel of the old E3 was little more than faintly organised chaos. Some loved it, some loathed it.

What a difference two years can make. In the run up to E3 2005, Doug Lowenstein, president of E3's organiser the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), claimed, "E3 Expo 2005 brings us to the threshold of a new era of creative and technological innovation for the videogame business… E3 truly is the best place on the planet to get down to the business of fun". How hollow these words seem in the aftermath of E3's demise, the 2005 event now held up as the nadir of the show's excess, emblematic of the industry's very worst traits and a colossally expensive undertaking with a real purpose somehow lost amid the escalating displays of crass one-upmanship and scantily clad publicity stunts.

Akin to the cancellation of the Oscars – a similarly derided collective backslap – the death of E3 is a seismic event in the industry's development, and has been almost universally praised as a positive move toward maturity. In response to the decision, Lowenstein recently commented, "Over the years, it has become increasingly apparent that we need a more intimate programme… It is no longer necessary or efficient to have a single industry mega-show. By refocusing on a highly targeted event, we think we can do a better job serving our members and the industry as a whole." To what degree the ESA saw the need for change as 'apparent' is unclear, though its hand was surely forced by the growing dissatisfaction of prominent publishers with the show's scale and cost in comparison to its efficiency as a promotional platform. Electronic Arts may have been cited as the ringleader, though concern over return on investment was surely felt industry-wide.

Though relative value for money is the underlying reason for the collapse, there were also more subtle forces at work. The growing number of publisher-sponsored events has taken emphasis away from the importance of a single week in May; the Internet now provides a method of immediate audience communication that simply wasn't possible at the show's genesis 12 years ago, and the time and resources needed to make the enterprise work effectively leads to an industry shutdown in the months directly before and after. Seemingly irrelevant sideshows that have grown out of the ferociously competitive environment – specifically the PR disaster of Booth Babes – will also be much celebrated by an industry ever more desperate for credibility.

INITIAL FEARS THAT E3 would completely cease to be were quickly allayed. Lowenstein put a proposal for a smaller, more restrained and above all more effective show format to a board of publishers, which was unanimously agreed upon. E3 may have been the industry's major claim to something approaching glamour, but in the long term it seems that the adrenaline and tumult will be all that's missed. Tentatively titled 'E3 Media Festival', the 2007 show will still take place in Los Angeles, though away from its traditional home of the LA Convention Centre. Initial plans are to stage proceedings between the conference rooms of two hotels – a good indication of the radical decrease in size – though such small details are a long way from being confirmed. The event will be bumped forward from May to July, thereby giving developers more time to work on their prestige products, which are normally slated for release at Christmas. "Companies were frustrated because E3 was such a huge, sweeping event and it became increasingly difficult to get their messages out," Lowenstein stated, and the forecasted 5,000 visitors for next year will be a huge reassurance to those that found the human traffic simply too much to deal with. The ESA's aim is to bottle the excitement of the old format into more manageable surroundings, ensuring that E3 remains a landmark event while maximising both productivity and industry participation. A lofty target to be sure, and one that may yet prove unreachable, but the industry reaction, initially at least, has been overwhelmingly positive.

Of course, from the ESA's point of view the major prize would be securing the support of the three

THE CONTENDERS

TOKYO GAME SHOW

With E3 cut down to size, the Tokyo Game Show is most likely the biggest of its type in the world. Held in September and located in the very heart of videogame culture, 200,000 visitors are expected to attend this year. The numbers are significantly boosted by the final two days being open to the public.

CHINA JOY

With such a huge population and resources, China can dominate almost anything it turns its metaphorical hand to. Interest in gaming is on the rise, and with such a huge potential audience there's no reason why China Joy shouldn't grow in stature. Also open to the public, China Joy offers gaming tournaments and even a carnival.

LEIPZIG GAMES CONVENTION

By far Europe's biggest show – although the Brighton Game Developers Conference also had a remarkably good year – Leipzig looks set to benefit from being the first major show in the aftermath of the E3 decision. Nintendo's choice of Leipzig as the venue for its latest Wii announcements is a big thumbs up for this growing success.

"WE ARE **VERY SUPPORTIVE** OF THE ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE ASSOCIATION'S DECISION IN PROVIDING **A NEW VISION FOR E3.** OVER THE PAST 12 YEARS, THE INDUSTRY HAS GROWN AND MATURED AND **IT'S GREAT TO SEE** THE SHOW **EVOLVING TO MEET THE NEEDS** OF THE INDUSTRY"
MICROSOFT SPOKESPERSON

E3 BY NUMBERS

BRINGING THE ISSUE DOWN TO SIZE

540,000
Square feet of space at E3 2005

2,700
City blocks' worth of floor space

60,000
Visitors to E3 2005

400
Conservative estimate of exhibitors at E3 2005

150
Industry speakers

87
Countries represented on the show floor

12
Years since the original E3

5,000
Visitors expected at new format E3



The largest trade show in the videogame industry is "evolving" into the low-key E3 Media Festival.

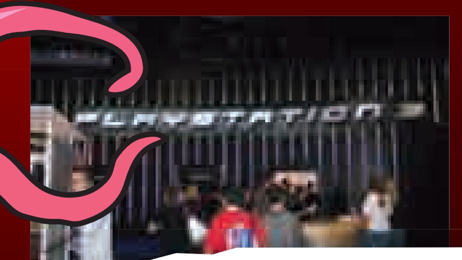
> **"EA SUPPORTS THE ESA'S DECISION** REGARDING E3. THE NEW EVENT WILL BE **LESS DISRUPTIVE TO DEVELOPMENT SCHEDULES**, AND A **SMALLER, MORE INTIMATE** SHOW IN LA IS LIKELY TO RESULT IN FURTHER **SUPPORT FOR REGIONAL EVENTS** SUCH AS LEIPZIG, CHINA JOY, TGS AND **OTHER EVENTS AROUND THE WORLD"**
> *SIMON SMITH-WRIGHT, ELECTRONIC ARTS*

platform holders, but, as yet, only Nintendo has gone so far as to pledge its participation in 2007's event. The precise scale of its involvement will no doubt be finalised as the new E3 Expo takes shape, and it is for this reason that Sony and Microsoft have been so reluctant to definitively state their commitment. An anonymous statement from a Microsoft spokesperson claimed that, "It's still early days, and we're not in a position to talk about what Microsoft will be doing in regards to next year's E3, though we'll make a decision nearer the time". A Sony spokesperson was similarly reserved, commenting, "We'll be making a statement about our plans for E3 in due course".

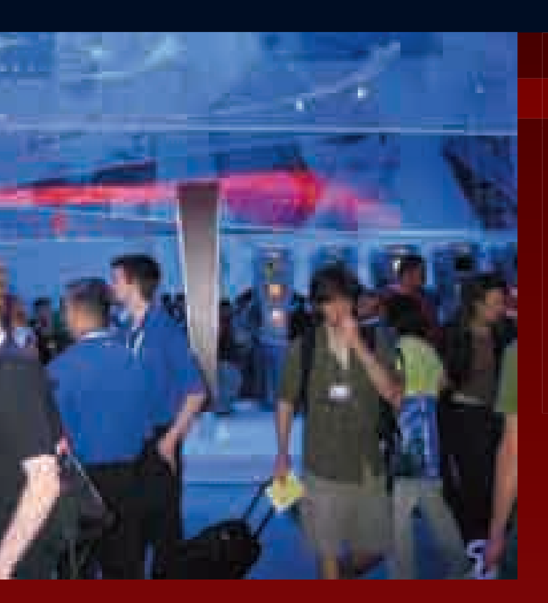
The immediate aftermath of the announcement saw the whole industry go into lockdown as the various public relations departments decided how to deal with the monumental news. With the gaming press and public eager to know, publishers and developers alike were forced into taking a stance, with a number of major players already stating their commitment to the event. This only makes Microsoft and Sony's silence – at least at the time of going to press – all the more baffling. If rumours are to be believed, the move was primarily motivated by pressure from top-rank publishers in a bid to decrease costs. For two of the world's biggest companies to remain so stubbornly reticent about a change made to better suit their interests seems overly cautious, and most expect Sony and Microsoft to join the party, on however small a level, very soon.

WITH THE FORMAT back under control and the emphasis once again on actually doing business, it is hoped that E3 will no longer stifle other trade shows to the same degree. The decrease in size should take the emphasis off the expo as an international event, and give regional shows a chance to develop and grow. Simon Smith-Wright of Electronic Arts commented, "The new event will be less disruptive to development schedules, and a smaller, more intimate show in LA is likely to result in further support for regional events such as Leipzig, China Joy and the Tokyo Game Show".

Geoff Heath, head of NCsoft Europe, recently spoke out about his hopes that the move will help install a degree of democracy in the industry calendar, singling out the Leipzig game conference as the main beneficiary. Leipzig has grown rapidly in the last few years in both size and attendance, with Nintendo supposedly favouring it over the Tokyo Game Show as the best platform to make price announcements about the Wii. Heath stated, "Leipzig is certainly



> "WE **SUPPORT THE ESA'S DECISION** TO EVOLVE E3 INTO A **MORE INTIMATE EVENT"**
> *ACTIVISION SPOKESPERSON*



"I THINK IT IS **A POSITIVE STEP FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT.** IT IS A SHOW THAT RUNS YEAR ON YEAR PRACTICALLY THE SAME, BUT I'VE ALWAYS FELT THAT **IT SHOULD BE OPEN TO CONSUMERS.** THEY ARE **THE BEST PLATFORM FOR NEW PRODUCTS.** MAYBE EVEN **A EUROPEAN TERRITORY EVENT** AT THE SAME TIME"

LEE KIRTON, ATARI

getting a lot more attention from outside of Germany, but the big differentiating factor is that Leipzig is a very hands-on consumer show, whereas E3 was trying hard to keep regular consumers out".

This consumer involvement is likely to be the element that endears Leipzig to the gaming public whose interaction with such events is usually limited to grainy Internet footage. Lee Kirton of Atari agrees, "I am disappointed that we as an industry are not putting on free events where consumers can play new games. Imagine the data capture of target audiences, and imagine getting feedback a year in advance so the audience can actually help in the creative side of the game". Accommodating consumers would, however, necessitate a show of considerable size thereby negating the reasons for E3's format change.

Along with the public, Kirton also hopes that the new E3 set-up will give smaller developers – often the most interesting – the chance to shine. With so much money being spent in previous years, the show had become monopolised by those who could afford to stand out. "I think everyone deserves a platform to show their titles, and downsizing it will give everyone the opportunity to feature in the same hall. Games are creative art and everyone deserves to be seen in the same way. Smaller companies still have amazing titles."

As a sentiment, it's hard to fault, though it's equally difficult to visualise this as the reality. Microsoft and Sony may be reserved in making their final decision on the new format, but as discussed there seems to be very little reason for them to drop out of a key industry show all together. With the platform holders in place and major publishers and developers vocal in their support for the move, there is every chance that the new E3 won't so much empower the little man, as be a way for the big boys to save cash. If EA, Ubisoft, THQ, Vivendi and a host of others are all willing to participate, the size of the event may not be enough to throw the spotlight onto smaller or independent developers.

However it transpires, the change seems to be unquestionably for the better. If industry leaders continue to dominate proceedings, we'll be no worse off than before, but, with all the strutting bravado gone, the show will be a much more effective tool for meaningful communication while also sending out a positive message about the industry as a whole. A small step, perhaps, but one in the right direction.



E3 2006 was the 'next-gen' show. Next year is unlikely to boast such high-profile events.

FROM THE FORUM

POSTED BY: James
It may actually make the big boys work just a little bit harder now that they have to compete on equal footing with the smaller, more recent and original companies out there, which can only benefit us gamers in the long run.

POSTED BY: pal_version
I feel that it's no major loss. Considering the lack of any major public interaction, a lot of the news at these events might as well just be featured on the official company websites. They would be getting the same message across without the cost of E3.

POSTED BY: darkglobe80
It will be a shame not to have that huge excitement every year, the massive costs, the extravagance, the speeches… It's wonderful – a way for the gaming industry to shine in the world's media where most of the time it gets so poorly represented.

POSTED BY: Simeon
After reading numerous reports on this 'new E3', I have my doubts about it. For one, hints have been dropped that it will not wholly be about games, but will include a larger focus on other entertainment factions such as movies.

POSTED BY: Rotek
The movie industry has a huge indie sector, but videogames are quite far behind in that respect. A smaller show should increase the output and awareness of these smaller companies, giving us some real innovations.

POSTED BY: Flank
For anyone relying on magazine publications for gaming news and information it seems like a backward step; more and more titles will be restricted to behind-closed-doors screenings, while NDAs will become as common as foul-mouthed cowboys are on *Deadwood*. Surely, this will do more to sully the ESA's good name than a thousand scantly clad women ever could.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

WITH GENUINE AMERICAN BRANDON SHEFFIELD



We know exactly how Nintendo 64 Kid felt when he unwrapped that wonderful box.

"MOST GAMES ARE STUPID ENOUGH IN CONCEPT A KID RIPPING OPEN PRESENTS AND GETTING EXCITED ISN'T

I just received a phone call from an Internet phenomenon's aunt. This happened just today – or last month, by magazine-time standards. In fact, on magazine time I was just walking among you. Like last week, I was in your midst, wandering around London, Leipzig, Amsterdam and Paris like a goddamned American tourist. I'm sure I took pictures of things. I'm sure I threw up in a toilet belonging to someone I didn't know very well. I probably groped your sister/girlfriend/treasured pet while you weren't looking, and for that I insincerely apologise. And now that you're reading this I'm back home, and you're none the wiser.

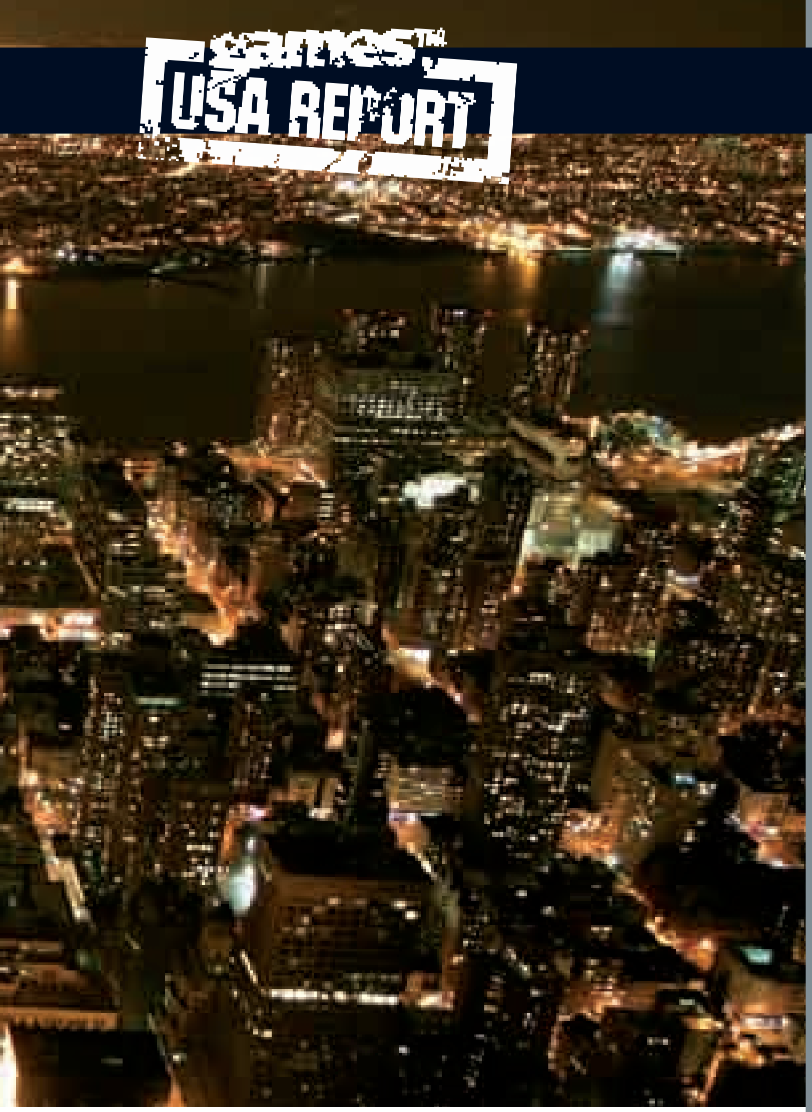
The fact is, I haven't even left yet and the phone call I refer to only happened about nine hours ago. The woman, whose name I promise you I do not recall, called me up saying that she got my phone number off the Internet. That frightens me to death for a start. I can tell you guys because you live far away and you're not going to waste all that money trying to call me at work. And if you did I'd just make fun of your accent.

Anyway, the point is she called and said that the 'Nintendo 64 kid' was her nephew. Now if you haven't heard of him, he's one of those Internet blips that YouTube is so good at creating nowadays. There's a video of him on there in which he gets an N64 for his birthday – it's easy to find, go and have a look. This took place something like ten years ago but only got up on the Internet in the last few months. You've looked at it by now, I'm sure. For some reason, the kid is extremely eager to get at that hunk of uselessness (hey, it's an opinion column, alright?), and it's all pretty funny. So the Internet got hold of it and ran, and now, according to N64 Kid's aunt, the video has 2.5 million views, and he has 70,000 hits daily on his MySpace account, or something equally falsified.

The reason she called – and this is key – was to discern (from me, no less) whether 'someone' would be interested in making a game about… I don't know, him? The video? I'm not sure where she was going with it. First of all, no. Second of all, I don't know? And third, definitely not. I mean, it's a one-minute video and it wasn't even his mom who called; it was his aunt. I've heard of parents exploiting their child actors and siphoning their money. Sure, that's fair – you made the little beast, you do what you want with it. But an aunt?

Now that the Internet is so pervasive that even my grandma knows what an email is, and hard media like the magazine you hold in your hands is becoming obsolete, we're seeing more and more flash-in-the pans and one-note kids getting their 15 minutes earlier in life, and then trying to ride it out for far too long. Of course, N64 Kid may not be like that himself – I hear he doesn't actually like games much any more, preferring instead to make skate videos. It just seems like some folks are trying to launch careers in this way now. I guess it's a semi-viable way to go about it, but you have to be able to keep it up and keep it interesting.





THAT MAKING ONE ABOUT SUCH AN AWFUL IDEA”

So I told her no, I didn't know who would make a game about this, and, yes, I was aware that some of the parodies seemed to use game art in them. It's true, most games are stupid enough in concept that making one about a kid ripping open presents and getting excited isn't such an awful idea. A plumber stomping mushrooms is just as idiotic, but Nintendo made it work through execution, not through scenario and concept. Those genius creations are now fewer and farther between. N64 Kid's aunt had an accidental point in thinking that someone might want to make a game about this. It has visibility, it's simple, you can do it fast… hell, somebody in Malaysia or India is probably working on a mobile phone version of 'N64 Kid' (called 'N63 Kid' for licence reasons) right now, and it's probably a *Tetris* clone, or *Sokoban* or something. Nothing to do with N64s or kids or N63s for that matter, but they'll make five bucks on it and be able to feed their families, and I can't fault them either.

So, who's to blame in all of this? I'm fond of the question of blame; it's one of my favourites. Hell, maybe this time I'll blame America. Most think everything's our fault right about now anyway, why not this? I'll leave it to you to connect the dots. The point is, Internet fads are a dime a dozen now; something used to sweep the nation (ours, yours, whichever), and people would know about it. Now, 2.5 million people can hear about something and still nobody you know has heard of it. That's the Internet in a nutshell. Let's all booze up and riot. Again, sorry about your sister but she begged me for it.

Many thanks



AMERIKAAN

PRODUCTS, PLACES, SERVICES AND EVENTS FROM THE LAND OF THE FREE



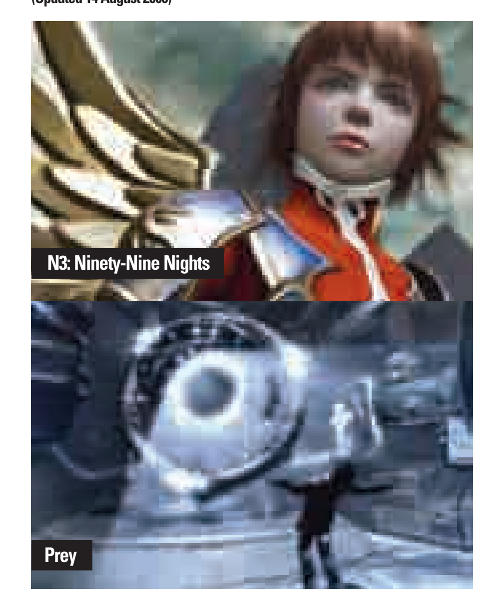
GRIM IN THE EAST

***Dead Rising* came out in America today, as well. I'm wishing I'd bought it at a mall, but of course… I just got it for free instead. Humorously, games developed in Japan are starting to come to the US or UK first, and then Japan after that. Well, sometimes. I know you still get the short end of the stick. But it's nice when this happens. Poor Japan's down to third biggest market now. This has nothing to do with penis sizes, I'm told.**

US MULTIFORMAT TOP TEN

	Title	Publisher	Format
1	Dead Rising	Capcom	360
2	N3: Ninety-Nine Nights	Microsoft	360
3	Saints Row	THQ	360
4	Madden NFL '07	Electronic Arts	360
5	Final Fantasy VII: Dirge Of Cerberus	SquareEnix	PS2
6	Madden NFL '07	Electronic Arts	PS2
7	Gears Of War	Microsoft	360
8	FlatOut 2	Empire	PS2
9	Prey	2K Games	360
10	Enchanted Arms	Ubisoft	360

(Updated 14 August 2006)


N3: Ninety-Nine Nights

Prey



KONGETSU*

WITH JAPANESE CORRESPONDENT TIM ROGERS

■ The maid craze that's swept the nation is breaking into the videogame market.

"A GAME COMPANY OPENED A MAID CAFÉ BASED ON A GAME CAFÉ IN THE GAME WAS IMAGINARY, HOWEVER, IT'S NOW

Akihabara, Tokyo's electronics paradise, beheld by outsiders as a pit into which fetishists descend to satisfy strange urges, has recently completed the first stage of a renaissance that will make it a hot spot for 'Activities Involving Normal People'. The formation of the Tsukuba Express, the world's fastest standard electric train connecting Akihabara to Japan Space Programme HQ, shed light on the town back in the fall of 2005. The opening of the train's terminal (deep underground) in Akihabara Station coincided with the opening of the Yodobashi Camera Akiba superstore – a nine-storey building with a footprint the size of a football field. It's the largest electronics store in the world, and even contains a Tower Records, a fancy bookstore, and over a dozen fine restaurants.

This cosmopolitan excitement is located outside a new exit on the other side of the huge Akihabara Station, called 'Central Exit'. This is to persuade first-timers to gravitate toward it so they don't end up stumbling outside the 'Electric Town Exit' where girls in maid outfits hand out packs of tissues. In the past, if you were running a local business, you'd hand out tissues to people exiting train stations – the packets had a map to your business tucked inside. You'd do this because in Japan local streets have no names. The tissues continue to be handed out. The important question here is why girls in maid outfits are handing out these tissues. Well, the simple answer is because maids are experiencing a boom in popularity. The longer answer has something to do with maid cafés.

It's such a tangled knot I don't know where to start unravelling it. There were a few animes a while back with maids in them. Their popularity grew and people wanted more mangas about maids. The fashion spread to young girls. These casual maid-dressers got serious and started to believe that dressing like a maid wasn't enough; they needed to act like one too. To do that, they'd need plenty of hot tea and men who wouldn't look at them unless they looked like a maid.

The concept of the maid café was born. The Cure Maid Café in Akihabara quickly became famous. It was a dumb yet brilliant idea: men would walk into the café, be greeted with a, "Welcome home, master," from the hostess, and led to a table. Waitresses clad in maid uniforms would bow low, call all customers 'Master', and apologise profusely for slow service (which was actually quite fast).

The girls are playing a role and the guys are free to play too – shouting at the waitress in mock anger if they see fit. That a maid café requires suspension of disbelief and is patronised mainly by sneering, sarcastic fanboys, and staffed exclusively by girls who 'get' the joke makes it conceptually less offensive to a person who'd consider a hostess bar a societal atrocity. Yet how can we tell that the fanboys', 'maid cafés are funny wink-wink,' attitude isn't a facade in and of itself?

I won't get into the bigger questions because I'll have to talk about outer space, and outer space is boring. There are now dozens of maid cafés all over Akihabara. This subculture is getting out of hand. Recently, a videogame company called Success – a misleading



ABOUT A MAID CAFÉ. THE ALSO A REAL MAID CAFÉ”

name – opened a maid café called Café Pelerinage to commemorate the release of a game, the name of which I won't mention because then I'd have to translate it and look like a jerk. And yes, the game is about a maid café.

In summary, a game company opened a maid café based on a game about a maid café. The café in the game was imaginary, however, it's now also a real maid café because of the game's popularity. Go to the real café, and real girls play the parts of the maids from the game. Any real-life message board you might use after visiting the café and talking about it can then replace the fake message board from the game.

I'm neither offended nor appalled by this; I just wish to say 'Please, Japan, stop'. You're giving columnists on magazines in foreign countries too many things to point at, shrug, and conclude, 'Japan sure is wacky'. Cross-pollination of mediums, purposes and audiences is something Japan is renowned for, and after you've seen as many videogames based on collectable trading card games based on television shows based on mangas based on videogames as I have, you kind of start to feel your IQ shrinking.

Kind regards



TEACH YOURSELF JAPANESE

LESSON 48: ROLE-PLAYING AT A MAID CAFÉ

Tadaima, goshuujin-sama.
Welcome home, master.

Mizu wo hayaku yatte kudasai.
I'd like a glass of water, and quickly.

Goshuujin-sama wa… koucha ikaga desuka?
Is master sure he wouldn't like… some tea?

Omae no goshuujin-sama tte, kyou aitsura ni oikakerarete sabaku wo watattekitandesuyo. Dakara mizu wo! Mizu!
Your 'master' was chased across the desert by rapscallions on his way home today. Therefore, make with the water!

Goshuujin-sama wa koucha tanomanai to shashin torenai wake desu yooooo…
Master, if you don't at least ask for tea, I can't let you take a picture of me…

Nandatte? Fuzakeruna! Omae wa oresama no meido janaika? Kubi!
What the hell? That's a terribly strange way for a maid to talk. You're fired!



THE HYPOTHETICAL MAID CAFE EXPERIMENT

Maid cafés are big business, but why? The tea comes in paper cups and the finest item on the menu is rice omelette with drawn-on ketchup hearts. The industry needs an overhaul otherwise the elite otaku will find something else to waste money on. Someone should open a maid café in the trendy Aoyama or Akasaka districts – private rooms, authentic costumes, tea from silver pots, food courtesy of a French chef, Welsh corgis to fetch slippers, all at extreme prices. Say, you ordered the ¥2,500 Earl Grey – inexplicably ¥1,000 higher than the ¥1,500 Earl Grey – a maid would deliver it on a silver platter and then 'accidentally' spill it on you. She breaks down and stands there sobbing till you tell her to clean it up. You can be gentle or angry.

There are already ninja and prison-themed restaurant where you're locked in cells; there are men's clubs where girls wear short skirts, and vents in the floors periodically reveal panties, and men giggle into their whiskey sours. This posh kind of maid café would be the perfect thing to tie of these theme-entertainment concepts together without resorting to prostitution. And then… they'd probably make a videogame about it.

JAPANESE MULTIFORMAT TOP TEN

	Title	Publisher	Format
1	SD Gundam G Generation Portable	Bandai	PSP
2	New Super Mario Bros	Nintendo	DS
3	Jissen Pachi-Slot Hisshouhou! Hokuto No Ken SE	Sega	PS2
4	Tamagotchi Connection 2	Bandai	DS
5	Mario Hoops 3-On-3	Nintendo	DS
6	Brain Training 2	Nintendo	DS
7	Cooking Navigator	Nintendo	DS
8	Devil Kings 2	Capcom	PS2
9	Rhythm Heaven	Nintendo	GBA
10	Growlanser V: Generations	Atlus	PS2

(Updated week ending 13 August 2006)


Mario Hoops 3-On-3

Devil Kings 2

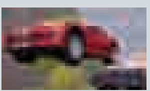
RELEASE LIST

CALM YOUR FEVERISH ANTICIPATION WITH OUR COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF FORTHCOMING RELEASES



MULTI-FORMAT CHART

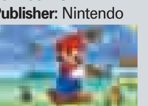
1 CARS
Format: GC, PC, PS2, PSP, Xbox
Publisher: THQ



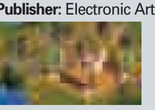
2 GTA: LIBERTY CITY STORIES
Format: PS2, PSP
Publisher: Rockstar



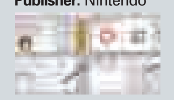
3 NEW SUPER MARIO BROS
Format: DS
Publisher: Nintendo



4 THE SIMS
Format: PC
Publisher: Electronic Arts



5 DR KAWASHIMA'S BRAIN TRAINING: HOW OLD IS YOUR BRAIN?
Format: DS
Publisher: Nintendo



6 THE SIMS 2
Format: PC, PS2, PSP, GC, Xbox
Publisher: Electronic Arts

7 PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 5
Format: PS2, Xbox , PC, PSP
Publisher: Konami

8 NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED
Format: PS2, GC, PC, Xbox
Publisher: Electronic Arts

9 PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: DEAD MAN'S CHEST
Format: PSP
Publisher: Buena Vista

10 OVER THE HEDGE
Format: PS2, Xbox, PC, GC
Publisher: Activision

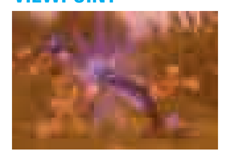
THIS MONTH – SEPTEMBER

Date	Title	Format
01 Sept	Gangs Of London	PSP
01 Sept	Project Xenoclone	PC
01 Sept	Saint's Row	360
01 Sept	Spectrum Allstars Volume 2	PC
01 Sept	Tekken: Dark Resurrection	PSP
01 Sept	Test Drive Unlimited	360
08 Sept	B-Boy	PS2, PSP
08 Sept	Rag Doll Kung Fu	PC
08 Sept	War Front: Turning Point	PC
08 Sept	Dead Rising	360
11 Sept	Mario Hoops 3-on-3	DS
15 Sept	Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War	PS2
15 Sept	Broken Sword: The Angel Of Death	PC
15 Sept	Call Of Juarez	PC
15 Sept	Nascar 07	PS2, PSP
15 Sept	Steambot Chronicles	PS2
15 Sept	Yakuza	PS2
19 Sept	Contact	DS
21 Sept	The Godfather	360
22 Sept	Def Jam Fight For NY: The Takeover	PSP
22 Sept	Guilty Gear Dust Strikers	DS
22 Sept	Guilty Gear Judgement	PSP
22 Sept	Jaws	PC, PS2, Xbox
25 Sept	Baiten Kaitos Origins	GC
25 Sept	Mario Vs Donkey Kong 2	DS
26 Sept	Battle Of B Daman: Fire Spirits	GBA
26 Sept	Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria	PSP
26 Sept	WTF	PSP
29 Sept	42 All Time Classics	DS
29 Sept	Company Of Heroes	PC
29 Sept	Hardcore Pool	DS
29 Sept	Infected	PSP
TBC	Ape Academy 2	PSP
TBC	Splinter Cell: Double Agent	360, GC, PC, PS2, Xbox
TBC	Gitaroo Man Lives!	PSP

VIEWPOINT

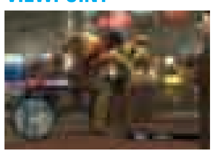
GANGS OF LONDON
Format: PSP
Publisher: Sony
A fun but flawed *Getaway* cousin with more extras than a night out with Ricky Gervais.

VIEWPOINT



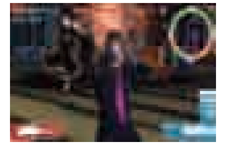
RAG DOLL KUNG FU
Format: PC
Publisher: Zoo Digital
Fun's an underrated quality these days, and *Rag Doll Kung Fu* is brimming with it.

VIEWPOINT



YAKUZA
Format: PS2
Publisher: Sega
It's been a long time coming. Sega's extremely sweary *Yakuza* is everything we wanted it to be.

VIEWPOINT



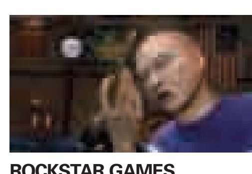
INFECTED
Format: PSP
Publisher: THQ
It has been months since the **games™** review of *Infected*, and it's finally hitting these shores. Good stuff.

BARGAIN BASEMENT

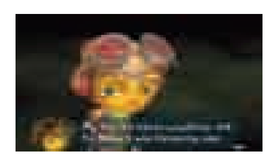
The best deals this month

RAINBOW SIX BLACK ARROW
Format: Xbox
Publisher: Capcom
Where: Woolworths
Price: £1.99
It might be old – really old – but this is still the finest *Rainbow* action available on the old Xbox. Banish any horrible memories of *Lockdown*, don't buy that summer Big Mac; get this in instead.



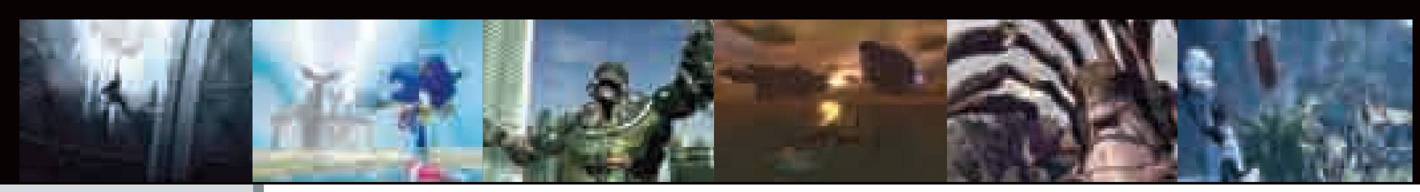


ROCKSTAR GAMES PRESENTS TABLE TENNIS
Format: 360 **Publisher:** Rockstar
Where: www.play.com **Price:** £17.99
It was never the most expensive 360 titles. Still, £18 is not to be sniffed at.



PSYCHONAUTS
Format: Xbox **Publisher:** Majesco
Where: Morrisons **Price:** £7.99
Tim Schaeffer's criminally under-loved adventure can be picked up for under a tenner. What are you waiting for?

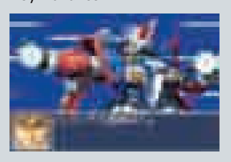
Check out the bargains thread at www.gamestm.co.uk/forum for bang-up-to-date deals. Your find could well feature on these hallowed pages.



games™ IMPORT WATCH

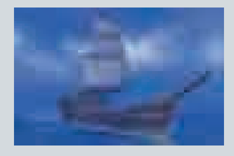
SUPER ROBOT TAISEN: ORIGINAL GENERATION 2

Format: GBA
Publisher: Atlus
Classic RPG action in its purest form. Westerners may not be too knowledgeable about *Super Robot Taisen*, but that's no excuse. You'd be hard pushed to find a better tactical experience on Game Boy Advance.



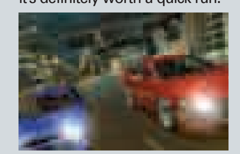
BLADE DANCER

Format: PSP
Publisher: Ignition
This month's import watch has a distinctly RPG flavour helped no end by *Blade Dancer*, Ignition's gorgeous PSP adventure. Mixes a heavy storyline with deep strategy to wonderful effect. See page 129.



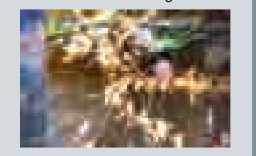
SHUTOKOU BATTLE X

Format: 360
Publisher: Genki
Those sick of *NFS* and *Burnout* may well find solace in Genki's next-gen update to *Tokyo Highway Battle*. It's no *PGR*, but it's definitely worth a quick run.



SENKOU NO RONDO REV X

Format: 360
Publisher: G-Rev
This crazy shooter is winning over all sorts of plaudits in the East. Exactly the type of title that 360 needs in Japan, and the kind of thing that has the otaku crowd swooning.



OCTOBER

Date	Title	Format
03 October	Super Robot Taisen: Original Generation 2	GBA
06 October	Barnyard	GBA, GC, PC, PS2
09 October	Super Paper Mario	GC
13 October	Warlords Champions	DS, PSP
20 October	Destroy All Humans! 2	Xbox
20 October	GTA: Vice City Stories	PSP
20 October	Rule Of Rose	PS2
27 October	Every Extend Extra	PSP
27 October	Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War – Dark Crusade	PC
30 October	Children Of Mana	DS
30 October	Pokémon Ranger	DS
TBC	Alone In The Dark	360, PC
TBC	Avatar: The Last Airbender	DS, GBA, GC, PC, PS2, PSP, Wii, Xbox
TBC	Bomberman	PSP
TBC	Bomberman: Act Zero	360
TBC	Call Of Duty 3	360, PS2, Xbox
TBC	Crackdown	360
TBC	Deep Labyrinth	DS
TBC	Disgaea 2	PS2
TBC	Dragon's Lair HD	PC
TBC	F.E.A.R.	360
TBC	Gun Showdown	PSP
TBC	Joint Task Force	PC
TBC	Just Cause	360, PC, PS2 Xbox
TBC	Justice League Heroes	DS, PS2, PSP, Xbox
TBC	Kingdom Hearts II	PS2
TBC	Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	DS, GBA, GC, PC, PS2, PSP, Xbox
TBC	Made Man	PS2, PC
TBC	Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	360, GBA, PC, PS2, PS3, PSP, Wii, Xbox
TBC	Metal Gear Solid: Subsistence	PS2
TBC	NHL 2K7	360, PS2, PS3, Xbox
TBC	Pro Evolution Soccer 6	360, DS, PC, PS2, PSP
TBC	Reservoir Dogs	PC, PS2, Xbox
TBC	Sam & Max	PC
TBC	Scarface: The World Is Yours	PC, PS2, Xbox
TBC	Sid Meier's Railroads!	PC
TBC	Star Trek: Legacy	360, PC
TBC	Tony Hawk's Project 8	360, PS2, PS3, PSP

FORWARD THINKING…



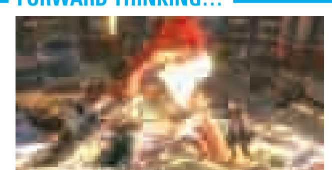
CHILDREN OF MANA
Format: DS
Publisher: Nintendo
The long-awaited follow up to *Secret Of Mana* is so close we can almost taste it.
30 October

FORWARD THINKING…



GTA: VICE CITY STORIES
Format: PSP
Publisher: Rockstar
We're desperate to take to the skies again in that Sea Chopper. The next GTA instalment is coming.
20 October

FORWARD THINKING…



HEAVENLY SWORD
Format: PS3
Publisher: Sony
The prettiest of all the PS3 launch games could well redefine the action adventure.
November

NOVEMBER

03 Nov	Bratz: Babyz	GBA, PC
03 Nov	Bratz: Forever Diamondz	GC
03 Nov	Need For Speed Carbon	360, DS, GBA, GC, PS2, PC, PSP, Xbox
06 Nov	Elite Beat Agents	DS
06 Nov	Final Fantasy V Advance	GBA
10 Nov	Pokémon Mystery Dungeon	DS, GBA
10 Nov	Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner	PS2
10 Nov	WWE Smackdown Vs RAW 2007	360, PS2, PSP
17 Nov	Gears Of War	360
24 Nov	Flushed Away	DS, GBA, GC, PS2
TBC	Avalon	PS3
TBC	Dark Sector	PS3
TBC	The Darkness	PS3
TBC	Devil May Cry 4	PS3
TBC	Fatal Inertia	PS3
TBC	Fight Night Round 3	PS3
TBC	Football Manager 2007	PC, PSP
TBC	Getaway	PS3
TBC	Guitar Hero 2	PS2
TBC	Gran Turismo HD	PS3
TBC	Heavenly Sword	PS3
TBC	Killzone Liberation	PSP
TBC	Ni-Oh	PS3
TBC	WarHawk	PS3

TBC '06

TBC	Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway	PC, PS3, 360
TBC	Forza Motorsport 2	360
TBC	Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising	PC
TBC	Lumines 2	PSP
TBC	Phantasy Star Universe	360, PC, PS2
TBC	Silent Hill Origins	PSP
TBC	Sonic Rivals	PSP
TBC	Sonic The Hedgehog	360, PS3
TBC	Stranglehold	360, PC, PS3
TBC	Too Human	360
TBC	Viva Piñata	360

TBC '07

TBC	Assassin's Creed	PS3
TBC	Coded Arms Assault	PS3
TBC	God Of War 2	PS2
TBC	Halo 3	360
TBC	Heart Of Empire: Rome	PC
TBC	Indiana Jones 2007	360, PS3
TBC	Kane & Lynch	360, PC
TBC	Lost Planet	360
TBC	Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops	PSP
TBC	Need For Speed Carbon	360, DS, GBA, GC, PC, PS2, PS3, PSP, Wii, Xbox
TBC	Phoenix Wright: Justice for All	DS
TBC	Rogue Galaxy	PS2
TBC	Sega Rally	360, PS3
TBC	Virtua Fighter 5	PS3
TBC	Virtua Tennis 3	360, PS3

FORWARD THINKING…



ARMY OF TWO
Format: 360
Publisher: Electronic Arts
With this and *Kane & Lynch* on the horizon, next year should be a co-op dream.
2007

PLEASE NOTE: *While every effort has been made to ensure these dates are correct at the time of going to press, they are liable to change at short notice. Which is completely beyond our control, so don't go giving us evils.*

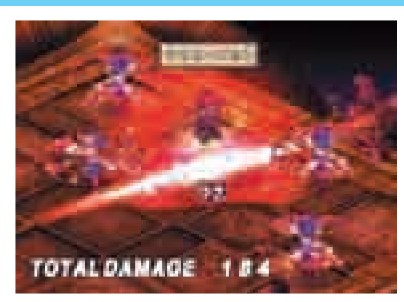
ESSENTIAL PURCHASE

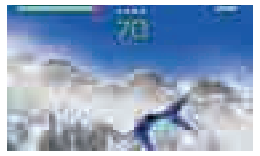
You'll definitely be wanting these

DISGAEA 2

Format: PS2
Publisher: Atlus

Atlus returns with the huge *Disgaea 2*. With over 50 hours of main quest peppered with quirky humour and hundreds of extended hours of playtime, this will keep the hardcore RPG-er going until 2010. Check out page 122 for a full review of this bizarre but ace little number.

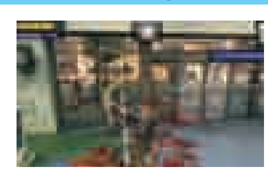




STARFOX COMMAND

Format: DS **Publisher:** Nintendo

We were expecting good things – but not this good. A masterclass in control, this blend of arwing action and *Advance Wars*-style strategy is a genuine classic.



DEAD RISING

Format: 360 **Publisher:** Capcom

Our most anticipated 360 game is enthralling, ambitious and downright fun. Only let down by a questionable save system and slightly misjudged structure.



Caught with his pants down **The Simpsons, Arcade [Konami] 1991**


INSERT COIN
INSERT COIN

JUST CAUSE

ISLAND IN THE SUN

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360, PC, PlayStation2, Xbox
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Eidos
DEVELOPER: Avalanche Studios
RELEASE: 22 September
GENRE: Action
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

■ Take on rival factions of a South American island cluster by parachuting onto their land, stealing their cars and shooting them until they burst.

OLD GEN

■ Early word suggests that the Xbox 360 and PC versions play identically to their bigger brothers but suffer from a 'sub-*GTA*' look that hampers everything from polygon count to draw distance.

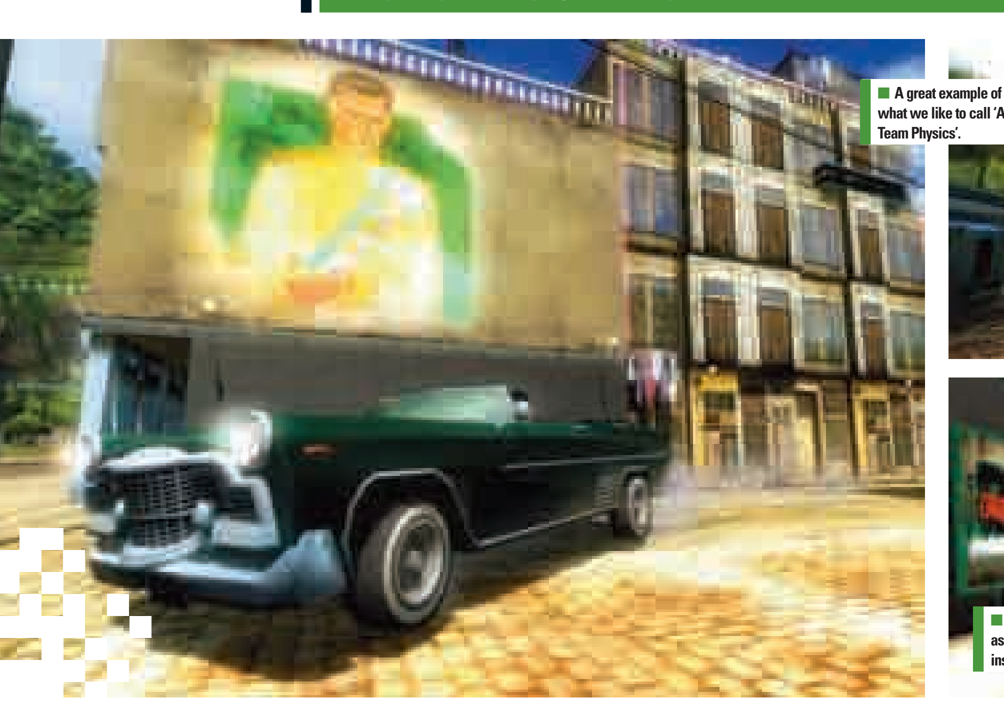
Initial impressions of *Just Cause* conjure thoughts of the ultimate sandbox videogame. A vast, immersive landscape, liberally peppered with an assortment of vehicles with which to recklessly travel between missions, and engage in overly dramatic chase sequences before leaping into a bloody bullet ballet at the climax of each excursion. And in this respect, *Just Cause* does not disappoint. From the opening skydive onward, the action thunders along at a swift pace, allowing time for a spot of speed boating, a beach shootout and an A-Team-style car chase complete with over-the-top explosions that send any and every car spinning through the air toward their fiery demise.

Action, as should now be very obvious, is the dish of the day in *Just Cause*. Every possible effort has been made to ensure that even the usually mundane tasks remain fast, dangerous and exhilarating. The upside of this is that travelling between checkpoints and mission objectives is far from the slow drudge that we had previously feared it might be. Unused cars, motorbikes and boats are certainly in abundance and are just waiting to be commandeered and rushed towards a chosen destination. Occupied vehicles may also be nabbed à la *Grand Theft Auto*, although doing so is likely to attract incredibly hostile attention. Avalanche Studios has been kind enough to provide several features that can make the use of said vehicles much more involving than simply driving from A to B. When driving cars or vans it is possible to enter Stunt mode, wherein Rico may leap between moving automobiles, and while riding a motorbike he has the handy ability to open a parachute mid-ride, dragging him hundreds of feet into the sky in order to drop into a nearby enclosure and rain bullets on anyone below. Upon extended play we also found that one of *Just Cause*'s most amusing diversions is to drive a car over a cliff at high speeds, use Stunt mode to 'surf' on the vehicle as momentum carries it through the air and then dive head first, straight into the sea. Needless to say, we've found that getting to the objective location can be just as enjoyable as the actual missions themselves.

On foot, *Just Cause* doesn't currently feel as well polished as its wheel-based sections. Aiming and firing is handled by a generic auto-aim function with a particularly large reticule that makes it incredibly difficult to actually miss anything. The camera, meanwhile, is one hundred per cent user controlled so that Rico may see off a few enemy soldiers while running backwards: a useful feature that is unfortunately let down by the need to constantly adjust the camera whenever Rico turns slightly to the left or right. Problems with pedestrian controls also occurred during the second mission

AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE

Much has been made of *Just Cause*'s so-called 'Avalanche engine' – the procedural landscape generator named after the studio – which will deliver 'a huge, beautiful, detailed world while eliminating loading times'. The short time that we spent with the game surprisingly proved these claims to be much more than fanciful PR hype. The islands of San Esperito stretch far into the distance with little sign of pop-up and (on Xbox 360 at least) none of the jerks and judders that plagued *Oblivion*. Even when the action hots up, the frame rate stays consistently fast. It certainly looks as though the next-generation promise of fully immersive, uninterrupted worlds may finally be developing into a reality.





■ A great example of what we like to call 'A-Team Physics'.



■ Hooray. You can now play as Zorro, but with a mototrcycle instead of Toronado the horse.



DEVELOPER PROFILE

Eidos Interactive is a British studio based in Wimbledon, London. Having made its millions by publishing Core Design's *Tomb Raider* in 1996, the firm has since moved on to publish hundreds of multiformat videogames by the likes of Crystal Dynamics, IO Interactive and Pivotal Games among others.

HISTORY

- **ROGUE TROOPER** 2006 [Multi]
- **FINAL FANTASY VII** 1998 [PC]
- **TOMB RAIDER** 1996 [Multi]

Expect to see plenty of Hollywood-style stunt action in *Just Cause*.

"THE MOST VARIED AND EXCITING ARRAY OF VEHICLES EVER SEEN IN A VIDEOGAME"

EIDOS PRESS RELEASE

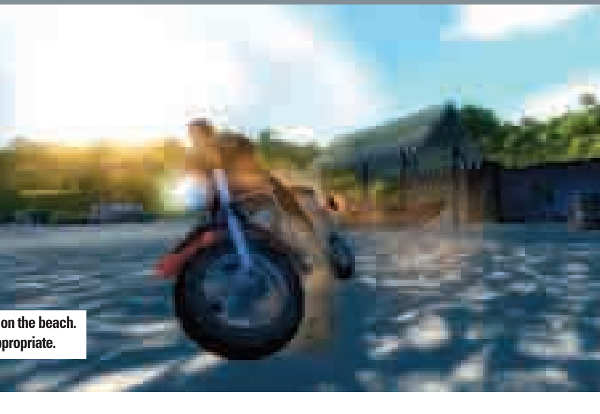
VIDEOGAMES MATHS

CAUSE AND FX

PURSUIT FORCE + OBLIVION + DRIVING STUNTS = JUST CAUSE



Whatever mode of transport you fancy getting around the islands in, we imagine you'll find it in *Just Cause*.



Sandbox on the beach. How very appropriate.

"ACTION, AS SHOULD NOW BE VERY OBVIOUS, IS THE DISH OF THE DAY IN JUST CAUSE"

when we tried to leap from a balcony only to find that the jumping animation was too large to allow us through a gap that should realistically have been quite manageable. Such problems may seem trivial, but the truth is that they do tarnish what would otherwise be a completely free-roaming world. Hopefully, Avalanche Studios will have time to iron out these creases before the game's release.

Just Cause's story should be common knowledge by now. To quickly recap: the game puts the player in control of Rico Rodriguez, a US secret agent who specialises in orchestrating political regime changes. This time, the Antonio Banderas-alike has been charged with the task of overthrowing the corrupt government of San Esperito: a South American country that is suspected of stockpiling weapons of mass destruction. When Rico first skydives into the islands of San Esperito, the entire country is consumed with political tensions that are just one step away from boiling over into a full-scale revolution – which is something our hero must help bring about. After the first mission to rescue San Esperito's most-wanted political activist, Rico joins a rebel force and must travel between settlements, liberating them as he goes.

'Liberating' in the world of *Just Cause* roughly translates to killing hundreds of people and causing as many explosions as possible until a town spirals into chaos and can be conquered by the rebels. Avalanche's idea of a revolution may be lacking in political subtlety, but as a videogame it certainly gets the job done; allowing the player a number of concentrated gunfights in between exploring the island and larking around with bikes and parachutes.

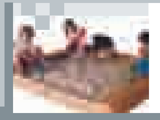
The liberation of each settlement should provide enough objectives to stop the open-ended gameplay derailing into random, unfocused sandbox gaming, although Avalanche will have to make sure each settlement is different enough to the last in order to encourage players to want to travel to them. The settlements that we liberated during the course of the preview didn't differ in any significant way. Each one merely required a lot of shooting with very little need to actually overcome any problems. Unlike a pure shooting game like *Resident Evil 4*, the enemies in *Just Cause* do not have any designated weak spots and do not display any particularly cunning artificial intelligence. Combat instead becomes a simple case of point and spray without worrying too much about how effective the weaponry will be.

As it stands, *Just Cause* is gearing up to be a fairly solid action game and currently shows a lot of promise. In order to polish the game into a real triple-A title, however, Avalanche must smooth out a fair few rough edges. Aside from the control issues mentioned above, there's one problem that could undo all of the developer's hard work - pacing. With such a gargantuan environment to explore (reportedly bigger than the world of *Oblivion*) *Just Cause* needs a few ways to make itself more digestible. Avalanche has gone some way to solve the problem by implementing the 'Heavy Drop', a feature that allows Rico to call in a vehicle whenever there are none nearby, but it would be much more helpful if there were simply more save points. Our current build has very few checkpoints, and traipsing all the way back across an island just to be able to switch the console off isn't our idea of fun. Such problems should be easy to fix but, at the time of writing, *Just Cause* is only six weeks away from final release, so we can only hope that Avalanche has the time to do some last-minute tweaking.

Pacing problems or not though, Avalanche's mix of tropical islands and fuel-injected adventure is still an incredibly impressive achievement, and we're sure that if the controls are tweaked sufficiently enough to create a greater challenge, then the developer will have a genuine sure-fire hit on its hands. The potential for a *GTA*-a-like that offers something sufficiently different is here, and now, it's all down to Avalanche's execution. Time, as they say, will tell.

SPREAD YOUR WINGS

One major aspect of *Just Cause* that didn't appear in the preview levels we've played so far, is the ability to fly. We've tested cars, trucks, boats and bikes but we're most looking forward to the many aeroplanes that Avalanche has hidden in San Esperito. If the airborne vehicles can be used in the same ways as the cars, using the 'Stunt Position' to jump between aeroplanes, then *Just Cause* might just have found its signature moment. Add in the ability to wing walk, skydive to another plane or parachute back down to earth, and the game's sandbox elements could potentially be more open to experimentation than any game to date.

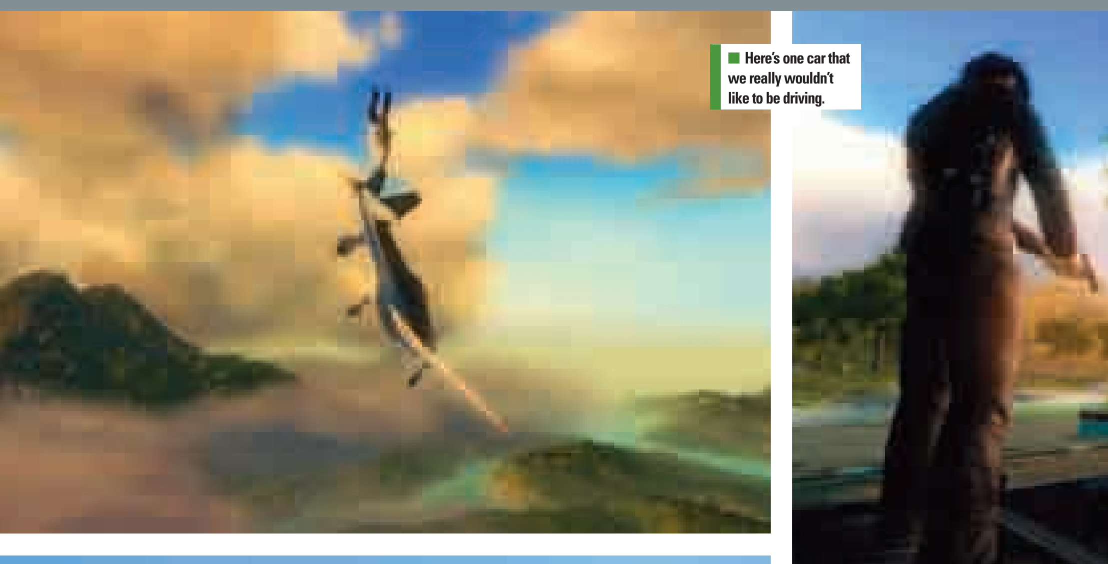


SANDBOX PROFILE

Sandbox games are a relatively new videogame phenomenon that originated in the 64-bit era. Taking its name from the children's play area, the sandbox game allows players to go anywhere and do anything. The emphasis is placed on creative play rather than competition or adventure.

HISTORY

- **THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION** 2006 [Multi]
- **GRAND THEFT AUTO III** 2001 [Multi]
- **SUPER MARIO 64** 1996 [Multi]



Here's one car that we really wouldn't like to be driving.



"JUST CAUSE OFFERS THE FREEDOM TO TACKLE YOUR ASSIGNMENT HOWEVER YOU WANT"
EIDOS PRESS RELEASE

DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC



Say hello to Mr Stabby. Don't worry, he doesn't bite. He just impales up to the hilt in your gut.

IMPALES, INCINERATES AND CRUSHES ITS RPG NAMESAKE TO DEATH

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Arkane Studios
RELEASE: October
GENRE: Action-Adventure
PLAYERS: 1 (2-32 Online)

CONCEPT

Serious swordplay, stealth and magic given a previously unseen level of realism and intelligent combat by its highly interactive environment.

When Ubisoft scooped the rights to the *Might And Magic* franchise following the demise of 3DO, suggesting another *Might And Magic* game was in the pipeline in addition to the fifth *Heroes* title, fans seized upon the idea of *Might And Magic X*. So Ubisoft's announcement of *Dark Messiah Of Might And Magic*, a successor to *M&M* only in spirit, came as a surprise to many. But let us clarify one point before continuing: *Dark Messiah* is nothing like the original *Might And Magic* games, sharing only a first-person perspective and a fantasy theme with the turn-based, role-playing adventure series. In fact, it has far more in common with Codemasters' 2001 appendage-amputating classic *Severance: Blade Of Darkness*, but with five years of graphical evolution and a revolutionary physics engine that has brought realism to a host of big titles. *Dark Messiah* holds ample promise for hardcore RPG fanatics and brainless-action junkies alike – so don't dismiss this game on either account just because it sounds like a genre you wouldn't normally play.

Experimentation is the key gameplay element of *Dark Messiah*. Combat will dominate your gaming experience, but with the *Half-Life 2* engine driving environmental mechanics and interactivity, the scope for dispatching your foes broadens far beyond the thrust and parry of swordplay. Virtually every object can be moved, thrown or smashed, and, while this isn't a characteristic unique to *Dark Messiah*, it's a few degrees more realistic than the slightly ropey physics we witnessed in *Oblivion*. Also littered throughout the game are otherwise immoveable structures with smash points indicated by a visual cue: a gleaming jewel. Bring these key features together with some careful scripting, level design and wily enemy AI, and suddenly combat becomes a frenetic game of chess. Smash a support strut and crush that orc, kick him over a precipice when his back is turned or hold your ground until he approaches, then knock him into the spikes.

We only played the first two levels, yet different avenues of opportunity for creative ways of sadistic slaughter presented themselves each time we played. Furthermore, we're promised even more tactical battles, where efficient use of your environment will be crucial in defeating overwhelmingly powerful opponents and far superior numbers. And as if that wasn't enough to hint on the potentially epic battles to come, the Cyclops teaser at the end of the demo certainly piqued our curiosity.

Dark Messiah is going to be quite demanding on the average computer and is probably one of the first games this year that will test a 2006-specification PC. Final system specs are still subject to review, but if you can afford to upgrade to a 3GHz+ processor and a video card (or even two in SLI) then you'll reap a graphical feast as your reward. Suffice to say, on **games™**'s Alienware beast the visuals were mouthwatering. At the time of writing, *Dark Messiah* is very near to its release, so what we're seeing will be close to the finished product. And if it lives up to its potential of visceral yet intelligent combat and profound ambience, this could be a contender for the best game of 2006.

> "DIFFERENT AVENUES OF OPPORTUNITY FOR CREATIVE WAYS OF SLAUGHTER PRESENTED THEMSELVES EACH TIME WE PLAYED"

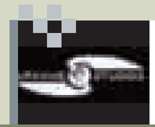
SECOND COMING

To a certain extent, *Dark Messiah* stays true to its RPG roots with a skill progression and level system. Each level you achieve yields points with which you can 'purchase' skills according to the role you want your character to take on. While *Dark Messiah* is primarily action orientated, this skill tree lends itself to role-playing as a sorcerer, warrior, thief, archer or a multi-class character. You're given all the tools you require at the beginning of the game, so the way in which you dispose of your enemy is left to you.



Contained within *Dark Messiah* is a lot of scope for slaughter.



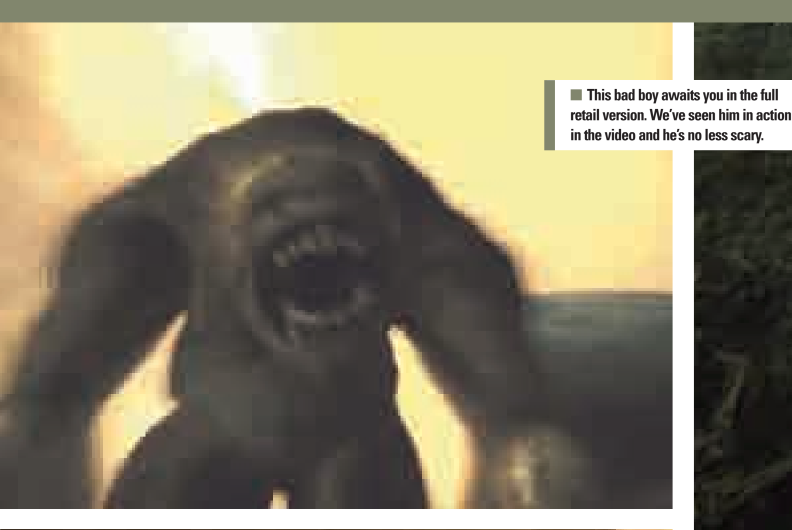


DEVELOPER PROFILE

Based in Lyon, France, Arkane Studios was founded in 1999 by several former developers mainly from Atari and Electronic Arts. Using a self-funded demo for *Arx Fatalis*, it secured publisher JoWood and went on to release the full game to international success.

HISTORY

- **ARX FATALIS** 2002 [Multi]

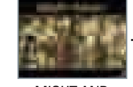




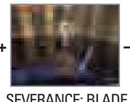
This bad boy awaits you in the full retail version. We've seen him in action in the video and he's no less scary.

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

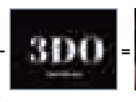
CALCULATED DEATH


MIGHT AND MAGIC

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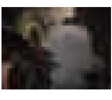

SEVERANCE: BLADE OF DARKNESS

–



3DO

=


DARK MESSIAH

"WHAT WE'RE TRYING TO DO IS MAKE IT CLEVER. WE WANTED THE ENEMIES TO LOOK SMART AND CLEVER AND TO MAKE THE COMBAT NICE"

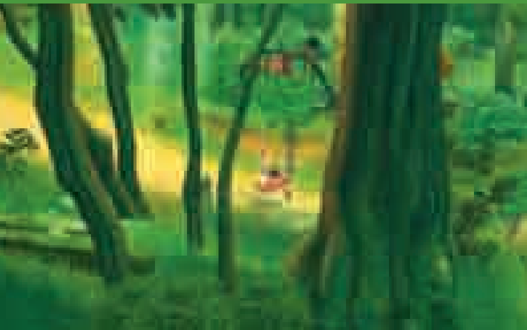
JULIEN ROBY, ARKANE STUDIOS

This may just test your PC's capabilities to the limit.

TRUSTY BELL: CHOPIN'S DREAM



All of Chopin's piano pieces will be performed by Russian pianist, Stanislav Butin.



"CAN YOU GET MUCH MORE ORIGINAL THAN A GAME ABOUT DEATH AND TERMINAL ILLNESS SET INSIDE THE HEAD OF A DYING, TERMINALLY ILL MAN?"

YES. CHOPIN THE COMPOSER

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: In-House
RELEASE: TBA (Japan: Q4 '06)
GENRE: Role-Playing Game
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

An RPG set inside the mind of long-dead romanticist classical composer, Frédéric François Chopin. Your guess is as good as ours.

Now, here's a concept delivered straight from the furthest left field in Japan. An RPG, set inside the mind of long-dead classical composer Frédéric François Chopin, starring young anime girls. Oh, how far things have come since *Space Invaders*. To embellish, the game is set during 1849, three months before Chopin succumbed to terminal illness. According to Namco Bandai, when in hospital Chopin had a vivid dream about these young ladies. In this dreamscape, the girls, who inhabit a gorgeous fairytale-like world, all have incurable diseases which give them magical powers. Of course.

Being a 360 game, *Trusty Bell* looks absolutely gorgeous. The environments are reminiscent of both *Final Fantasy VIII* and the overlooked Xbox RPG *Sudeki* – open, vibrant forests and towns drenched in colour and gleaming with health. The characters themselves are also stunning – subtly cel-shaded, immaculately detailed and beautifully drawn, particularly the female protagonist, Polka.

You might spot the theme here. Polka is near death, meaning she has strong powers, and must travel the world of Tenuto with her best friend Allegretto, all inside Chopin's head. Rather bludgeoningly, the game is all about music. Exactly how and why the music will be included is, frustratingly, not yet known, but if the whole game passes without at least a few bars of Chopin's most famous piece – *The Funeral March* – we'll be extremely surprised; this is a whole game about death and Chopin after all.

Despite the rather morbid overtones, early signs point toward a lively, action-orientated RPG. The battles look to mix traditional turn-based combat with a combo-driven twist with umbrellas and swords aplenty suggesting an appearance of the always controversial random combat mechanic that splits the RPG community in two. Only when Namco chooses to release the next wave of *Trusty Bell* information will the full scale of *Chopin's Dream*'s battle system become clear. We're banking on some sort of *Ocarina*-style musical integration.

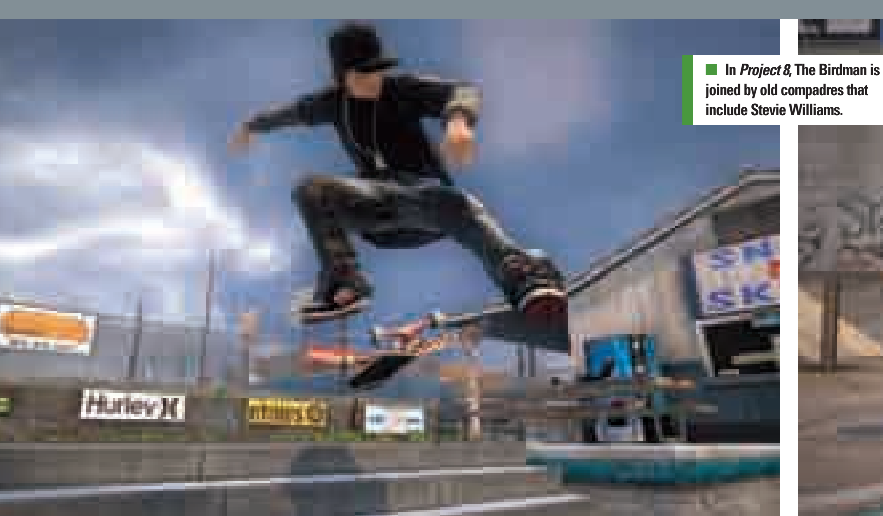
A December release has been chalked up for Japan, but this seems destined to slip, and with no sign of a US or UK conversion it may be long into 2007 before **games™** can flex its piano-playing fingers. Still, with visuals to die for, a score from legendary *Tales* composer Motoi Sakuraba and a truly unique concept, *Trusty Bell* is definitely worth keeping an eye on. Can you get much more original than a game about death and terminal illness set inside the head of dying, terminally ill man? Turns out it's not just Kojima who can do postmodernism.



This is Polka. She may look like your typical RPG heroine, but she's very, very ill.


eMag

TONY HAWK'S PROJECT 8





In *Project 8*, The Birdman is joined by old compadres that include Stevie Williams.

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

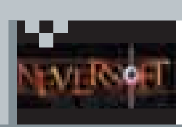
FIGURE OF 8

THPS + HDR – JACKASS = TONY HAWK'S PROJECT 8

"THE TONY HAWK SERIES HAS A GREAT TRADITION OF STELLAR LEVEL DESIGN, TIGHT PLAYER CONTROL AND COMPELLING GOAL DESIGNS"

BRIAN BRIGHT, NEVERSOFT

You'd think that someone pulling off a perfect Benihana would look slightly happier, no?



DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Neversoft, king of interactive skateboarding, is now a genuine development giant. The resources required for *Project 8* have meant the team once again had to expand rapidly and is quickly approaching behemoth standards. Also responsible for *Gun*, the free-roaming Western bore-fest.

HISTORY



- THAW 2005 [Multi]
- THPS 3 2001 [Multi]
- THPS 1999 [Multi]

LIFE'S LOOKING UP FOR THE HAWK



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360/ PlayStation3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Neversoft
RELEASE: Q4 '06
GENRE: Sports
PLAYERS: TBA

CONCEPT

■ A completely rebuilt *Tony Hawk's* engine powers *Project 8*, as players skate freely around a fully streaming HDR-lit town.

OLD GEN

■ The PS2 and Xbox versions are being handled by Shaba, marking the series' last stand on the current-gen consoles. Unlike *THAW*, *Project 8* is a next-gen game first and foremost – and it shows. Expect a far more traditional *Hawk* experience on the old machines.

How many times have we heard the phrase 'going back to our roots' during a videogame's pre-release hype? It's a far from exclusive claim – movies, television, and especially bands are all guilty of overusing this most tenuous of clichés. Sometimes it works out for the best – we certainly remember hearing it before *American Idiot* tore up the album charts – but all too often it's a cynical PR trick to evoke memories from when a series or group was actually any good (think Oasis). However, with *Tony Hawk's Project 8*, it would seem, painful as it is to say, that Neversoft is indeed 'going back to its roots'.

Gone is the *Jackass*-style sub humour. Bam Margera has returned to doing what he does best – annoying Don Vito and actually skating – and the overall tone is far more subdued. Cool greys, blues and browns have been used to carve out *Project 8*'s townscape, an entirely congruous streaming environment with no loading times or *THAW*-style tunnels. The trailers and hype videos show not Margera and Steve-O, but epitomes of skating cool Stevie Williams and Rodney Mullen. Already it feels different.

And it really is. Neversoft has scrapped seven years of code, and rebuilt the *Tony Hawk* engine from the ground up with strong focus on momentum and physics. Whereas in all previous *Tony* games, successful tricking would increase your boarder's speed, now you actually have to earn that pace. Boosting down large hills, using mini ramps and generally avoiding steep inclines are now crucial to perfecting lines, making for a very different style of play and a rude awakening for anyone who takes million-point combos for granted. With *Project 8*, Neversoft is attempting to make the most realistic and edgy *Tony Hawk's* game yet. The aforementioned animation combines with the momentum to make skating more believable than ever; it's far more organic than the canned movements of the series' past.

■ The environments stretch outwards and upwards to provide the most expansive *Tony* yet.



■ NPCs now react far more realistically, notice how they are actually looking at the crazy skater this time.

"THE POTENTIAL IS HERE TO TAKE THE SERIES TO THE FABLED 'NEXT LEVEL'"

Skaters now visibly struggle for balance on grinds, shifting their weight realistically for flip tricks, and bailing with spectacular ragdoll consequences. According to series project director Brian Bright, there can be 20 different animations playing on the skater at any one time. This means that every situation has unique animation dependent on the angle of the board, the ground and the most recent trick. It has the potential to revolutionise the way the game is played.

The new trick system is also a revolution. During key moments spine transfers, large gaps and generally 'large air', as well as a bullet time mechanic will all kick in, and players can use the analogue sticks to simulate all manner of kickflips, shove-its and indys. As the board is animated with physics and not a scripted routine, subtle changes in analogue manipulation will create different tricks, so one human player can have a genuinely distinctive style from another – very cool for online play.

If *Project 8* is anything less than the greatest Tony yet, Neversoft will have really dropped the ball. The potential is here to deliver a truly next-gen skating experience, and to take the world's favourite extreme sport franchise to the fabled 'next level'. We've been burned by Tony's promises in the past, so let's hope that he's learned his lessons well.

PRATFALLS

Project 8 incorporates a fully controllable physics-based bailing system. Replacing the rather weak 'freak outs' of yesteryear is the option to leap from your board and move your prone boarder through the air, as he twists and contorts before slamming head/ankle/spleen first into the sharpest corner you can find. The game keeps track of broken bones and injuries on your stat sheet, and project director Brian Bright claims, "kids will love it!" We won't tell Thompson if you don't.

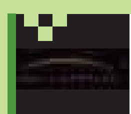
F.E.A.R.



F.E.A.R. after beer. You may need to indulge in some of that Dutch courage when you're faced with Alma.

"WHAT YOU DON'T SEE IS SCARIER THAN WHAT YOU DO SEE… THAT'S WHAT BUILDS THE FEAR AND ATMOSPHERE"
ROB LOFTUS, PRODUCER

Save your slow-mo for multiple enemies. It's particularly handy when you're surrounded, with little cover.

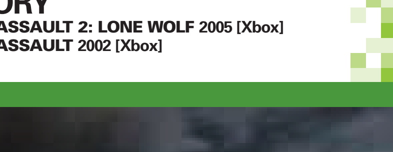


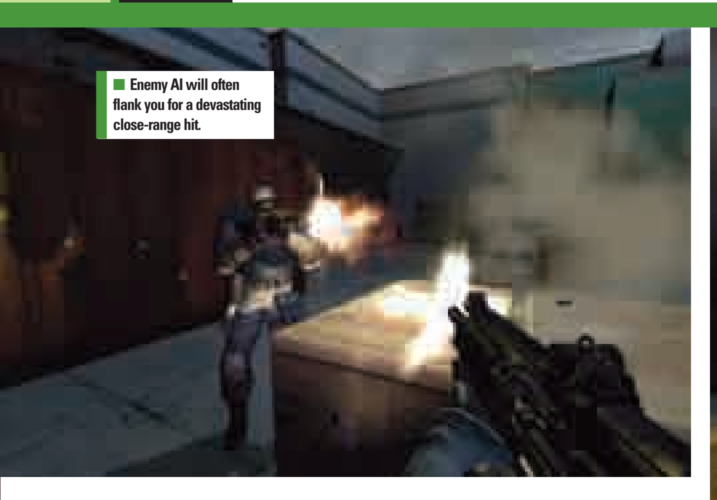
DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Two development teams make up Day 1 Studios: one in Illinois and the other in Maryland. Collectively, both teams average a decade of experience in the industry with some members tracing their developer lineage back to early Nineties consoles and arcades.

HISTORY

■ MECHASSAULT 2: LONE WOLF 2005 [Xbox]
■ MECHASSAULT 2002 [Xbox]





■ Enemy AI will often flank you for a devastating close-range hit.



■ 360 *F.E.A.R.* includes unlockable Achievements to boost the single-player game.

DELIVERS EXACTLY WHAT THE NAME PROMISES

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: VU Games
DEVELOPER: Day 1 Studios
RELEASE: 15 September
GENRE: First-Person Shooter
PLAYERS: 1 (2-16 Online)

CONCEPT

■ *F.E.A.R.* seamlessly stitches together a series of action and chiller montages. It's a gratuitously gory and genuinely frightening first-person shooter with a horror theme.

Currently, PC *F.E.A.R.* gamers have enjoyed a year of the pant-soiling FPS, whereas Xbox 360 owners have had to make do with Monolith's other freaky action title *Condemned*, which isn't quite in the same brown-underwear league. And while you might complain about the necessity of yet another hardcore action title on the FPS-saturated 360, *F.E.A.R.* will surprise you by straddling the horror and FPS genres, and leaning significantly toward the former.

With the original PC developer, Monolith, tied up with other projects, Vivendi has lumbered Day 1 Studios with the responsibility of porting the PC hit. The formula was very successful on PC and, apart from implementing online features, the sensible decision has been made not to fix what wasn't broken.

F.E.A.R. – or First Encounter Assault Recon – is the name of the paranormal detective team sent to investigate a prototype battalion of telepathic clone soldiers gone AWOL. Your initial impression as you set foot in a shadowy urban environment will be that of a typical *Half-Life 2* scenario: that the mission will mostly be a comparatively innocuous firefight and that it will culminate in a bloody battle with the insane, cannibalistic clone commander, Paxton Fettel. It appears to be all about flashy lighting effects, realistic physics engines and balanced weapons systems: the stalwart features of a solid FPS. And then *F.E.A.R.* creeps up behind you and gives you a big fright in the form of Alma.

Essentially, what people fear most is the unknown and this is the basis for *F.E.A.R.*'s psychological chill factor. You're told very little about yourself, you know less about Paxton Fettel and his agenda, and up until her first appearance you don't even know of the existence of Alma, the enigmatic child with grotesque paranormal powers. However, it becomes apparent early on that she's capable of acts of unspeakable evil. Both these characters make numerous appearances between phases of FPS action and, despite the frequency, never lose their potency to give you the heebie-jeebies. But it's Alma, the sadistic Kubrickian child, who'll make you reconsider playing at night.

> **"IT'S ALMA, THE SADISTIC KUBRICKIAN CHILD, WHO'LL MAKE YOU RECONSIDER PLAYING AT NIGHT"**

The conversion of PC keyboard and mouse to 360 controller has been effective enough and although anyone used to the WASD standard of PC action gaming won't find it quite as intuitive, the option to remap the controller proves useful enough. Graphically, the 360 version will shine among average-specification PCs, but little difference will be seen alongside a high-end computer on a TFT screen. But the edge 360 *F.E.A.R.* has over PC is the online content available. In addition to online multi-player, there are a number of unlockable Achievements that will extend the single-player *F.E.A.R.* experience well beyond its offline lifetime.

We're expecting some graphical polishing prior to its release, but the job is virtually finished and we're sure 360 owners will be more than dazzled by *F.E.A.R.* when it hits the shelves next week.

PC +

Slow motion has recently become a trademark of Monolith's games. Its latest title in development, *TimeShift*, features slow motion, time stop and time reverse, but this was preceded by *F.E.A.R.*'s time manipulation in a different context. Due to your supersonic reactions, you're capable of short bursts of incredible speed, and during this period time appears to slow down, enabling you to dispatch enemies with greater ease. This ability is limited by a metre that slowly regenerates once drained. Day 1 has also coded some extra content for the 360 version of *F.E.A.R.*, in the form of an additional level and weapon, in case an excellent PC conversion wasn't a good enough incentive for you.

COLIN McRAE: DIRT



■ Pure '*DIRT*' – having completed their courtship, the native dune buggies begin to mate.

■ Rally cross events will test the new damage engine to the limit.

CODEMASTERS SULLIES THE NAME OF ITS FAMOUS RALLY GAME

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3, Xbox 360, PC, Mobile
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Codemasters
DEVELOPER: Codemasters
RELEASE: 2007
GENRE: Racing
PLAYERS: TBC

CONCEPT

■ More of the authentic, dirty, breakneck and adrenalin-fuelled rallying we're used to, but with next-generation power.

PS3 **When *Colin McRae Rally* was released in 1998 to critical acclaim, it hit upon an audience that realised it was lacking a highly realistic, heavily endorsed rally game.** Now, eight years, five games and six formats (plus PC and Mac) later, the *Colin McRae* franchise crosses into its third generation of consoles. The game has such a simple premise (ultra-realistic rallying) that, what with the rapid developments in game technology and professional rallying itself, it's not surprising that Codemasters has been able to keep this game fresh with each new iteration.

Colin McRae: DIRT (or *DIRT: Colin McRae Off-Road Stateside*) will be Codemasters' first *Colin McRae* to hit Xbox 360 and PlayStation3, shunning older consoles and allowing more development time for the newer technologies. Perhaps this is in recognition of the fact that it took the series as far as it could with the last generation? The developer now has a massive amount of scope for improvement.

Obvious graphical improvements aside (see screenshots), Codemasters has also ramped up the physics engine and designed a completely new damage modelling system for *Colin McRae: DIRT* to take advantage of next-gen console muscle. This is a worthy selling point in itself as the previous games' engines were impressively cutting-edge for their time. Reactive environments such as breaking fences and dust clouds have already featured in the last few games, but now individually bent blades of grass, mud decals and a range of various-sized particles being kicked up by the vehicle as it rips through the terrain are likely items on the agenda. After all, this level of detail has already been witnessed in other next-generation titles such as Bethesda Softworks' mighty *Oblivion*.

It's a woolly comparison to make, but *Colin McRae: DIRT* has *Oblivion*-scale environments: a massive 12.4 miles of dirt track – the entire Pikes Peak International Rally Course in addition to the dedicated championship modes and the huge variety of 2WD, 4WD, RWD and classic rally cars. Codemasters has boasted that *Colin McRae: DIRT* will, "take players further off road than ever before". Whether we should take that literally and expect to be able to take vehicles off course into the alpine scrub for sneaky shortcuts remains to be seen.

We've already seen the benefits reaped from next-gen beef on other racing games like *PGR* and *Burnout Revenge*. And with *Test Drive Unlimited* arriving this month, the development team has a fair idea of what's being done, although it's a safe bet that *Colin McRae: DIRT* will prove as popular as its predecessors.

> "A MASSIVE 12.4 MILES OF DIRT TRACK – THE ENTIRE PIKES PEAK INTERNATIONAL RALLY COURSE"



■ Reactive environments see *Colin McRae: DIRT* take rallying to an exquisite level of detail.


eMag

KANE & LYNCH: DEAD MEN

"NO GAMER WILL HAVE EXPERIENCED ANYTHING LIKE THIS BEFORE, BOTH GRAPHICALLY AND IN TERMS OF GAMEPLAY"

LARRY SPARKS, EIDOS

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

LYNCH MOB

FREEDOM FIGHTERS + GOLD x NUTTERS = KANE & LYNCH



Kane and Lynch will often argue during quiet moments, which keeps cut-scenes to a merciful minimum.



You can command your squad, but the superior AI means they will often take the initiative.



DEVELOPER PROFILE

It may not have made many games, but IO Interactive boasts as high a hit rate as any developer out there. It established itself with the *Hitman* franchise, producing four critically and commercially successful titles. Along with *Freedom Fighters, Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* marks IO's sole departure from the series.

HISTORY

- **Hitman: Blood Money** 2006 [Multi]
- **Freedom Fighters** 2003 [Multi]
- **Hitman 2: Silent Assassin** 2002 [Multi]

TREACHERY. MURDER. CORRUPTION. WHERE DO WE SIGN UP?

Industrious fellows, those people at IO Interactive. No sooner had they treated us to *Hitman: Blood Money* than they were ready to showcase two levels from their forthcoming epic, *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men*. That the IO team is a talented bunch was never in doubt, but it was impossible not to be impressed by the quality we saw so soon after the release of such a prestigious title.

Great pains have been taken to ensure we understand that in *Kane & Lynch* story and character are king. Everything in the game is a naturally occurring part of the story, and no environment, set piece or event is contrived to spice up the proceedings. It is an unusual claim – after all, the story is more likely to be loaded with action rather than kitchen-sink drama – but it does suggest that IO has thought about its narrative more than is strictly necessary.

The game will offer Single-player and Co-op modes, playing as the titular Kane and Lynch – unsavoury characters the pair. Lynch was a married man from Detroit, whose life fell apart when he developed psychiatric problems, eventually ending up on death row. The game is primarily focused on Kane – in Single-player Lynch is computer controlled – who was also once married until his infant son found the household gun and shot himself. After disappearing for several years he resurfaces as a mercenary working for a mafia-like organisation known as 'The Seven'. When a job goes disastrously wrong, Kane is left as the sole survivor with a bag full of gold. He makes a run for it, but is caught and sentenced to death. This is where he meets Lynch. This is where the story begins…



The game itself takes place after the pair have been broken out of prison, and Kane is forced to retrieve the gold lest his family meet a sticky end. The two levels we saw were based in Tokyo with the first one a particular standout. Taking place in a nightclub, which was most notable for the fact that it actually looked like a nightclub, the volume of NPCs is reminiscent of the Mardi Gras level in *Blood Money* while the lasers, strobes and pumping soundtrack add credence to a superbly evocative environment. After kidnapping the daughter of a gang boss in the back room, Kane and Lynch have to find their way to an exit – Kane leading the way with a shotgun; Lynch carrying the unconscious woman on his back. The pair push their way through the crowd, blasting any guards who come too close. With the dark of the club illuminated by gunshots and flashlights, and scores of NPCs darting across the line of fire, this looked a thrilling and spectacular set piece.

The second level sees Kane and Lynch as part of a five-man team, rappelling down a building to interrupt a board meeting and snatch a briefcase full of gold – a fantastic moment that involves blowing a hole in the window and storming the room from the outside. The majority of levels will have a team-based element, with a maximum of five units under your control – though each can consist of up to three separate NPCs. Weapons are accessed through a wheel similar to that in *Freedom Fighters*, while ammo can be handed to and taken from members of your team. The team commands are limited, but then *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* is unashamedly about the action, and the highly populated and fully destructible environments suggest that any team-based play will merely be the icing on a bloody and morally ambiguous cake.

The rappelling sequence was one of the presentation's standouts.

FRIEND OR FOE

Any game that allows you to gun down civilians with no penalty is clearly morally dubious, but with *Kane & Lynch* that uncertainty permeates to the core. Your team are mercenaries with loyalty to nothing but their paycheque. Give them a suicidal order or try to take their last ammo clip and you might well be met with stubborn refusal. Likewise, the central pair's relationship is strained, and Lynch seldom takes kindly to an order from Kane. Whenever the pair stop for more than a few seconds they start bickering. Along with an intriguing audio flashback when close to death, IO plans to make this a primary source of story exposition, thereby keeping cut-scenes to a minimum.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: Denmark
PUBLISHER: Eidos
DEVELOPER: IO Interactive
RELEASE: Q2 '07
GENRE: Action
PLAYERS: 1-2

CONCEPT

Guide two morally bankrupt men on a mission to retrieve some gold while killing loads of people – innocent and deserving – in the process.

MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR

CONTINUES TO MAKE GAMING HISTORY IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Creative Assembly
RELEASE: November
GENRE: Strategy
PLAYERS: 1-8

CONCEPT

Since its inception, the highly acclaimed *Total War* series has prided itself on being the pinnacle of sophisticated strategy titles.

It's a series that scarcely needs an introduction to the layman, let alone the videogame community. Having won a burgeoning cabinet of prestigious awards (we know, because we've seen it) and spawned the popular TV programme *Time Commanders*, the buzz surrounding the *Total War* games has often spilled beyond gaming circles into the consciousness of the general public. And the fourth title, currently moving into the Beta stage, promises to continue the tradition of high-quality strategy at E3. So with a scant few months before deadline, we went along to Creative Assembly's stronghold to see *Medieval II: Total War*'s progress.

With the current generation of PCs capable of attributing individual characteristics to the tiniest graphical element, *Medieval II* takes advantage of this new power by giving battles a profound level of realism. War can be waged with up to 10,000 units viewable at any one time, but no longer will you control an army of clones. Each unit moves independently of each other, pairing off for their own distinctive battles and acquiring unique mud, gore and damage decals as the battle progresses. This feature is also apparent in the vegetation and battlefield terrain, as well as a dynamic weather system that proves more than just an aesthetic touch by influencing the attributes of different units. We didn't get to see any siege battles, but Creative assured us that it had implemented a new damage engine for *Medieval II* that showed the impact of trebuchet missiles on castle walls. Even in its current state *Medieval II* is visually captivating and already looks a world beyond *Rome*.

> "EVEN IN ITS CURRENT STATE MEDIEVAL II IS VISUALLY CAPTIVATING AND ALREADY LOOKS A WORLD BEYOND ROME"

Medieval II's map phase has now evolved almost into a Risk-style strategy game in itself. Merchants, priests, spies and princesses can move around the map and have a range of abilities appropriate to different situations. Generals control your armies and have an additional dread factor, which changes according to their (your) treatment of prisoners. This can be used to cow the population of an enemy town when high, or rally your troops in battle when low. Each of *Medieval II*'s 17 playable factions also has a religious foundation, with figureheads who can assign missions and influence diplomatic relations among adhering factions. The Pope fronts Catholic factions, for example, ordering countries on crusades and excommunicating those who fail to keep the faith, resulting in a dangerously weak diplomatic stance with other Catholic nations.

Total War's historical basis has always lent itself to the recreation of legendary battles, and *Medieval II* boasts a variety of single-battle scenarios, one of which is the battle of Agincourt. Immortalised by the Shakespeare play *Henry V*, *Medieval II* even recreates in FMV some of the stirring prose with which Henry was alleged to have rallied his troops prior to the battle. The outcome, of course, was a historic English victory, but you'll have to be a particularly shrewd commander to outwit the French this time round.

We're very impressed with current progress on *Medieval II*, although frankly, we didn't expect anything less. The hardcore strategy and graphical 'wow' on display really raises the bar for the genre, and with a release of November all but confirmed, we eagerly await our next battle.

...COLUMBUS SAILED THE OCEAN BLUE

***Medieval II*'s timeline stretches from 1080-1530AD. Significant discoveries were made during this period and Creative has applied key events at specific points in the game that influence the course of *Medieval II*'s history. One of these events unlocks the land mass of the Americas: a wilderness rich in gold and untapped resources. It's then a race to reach, explore and colonise these continents. They're fiercely defended by indigenous populations like the Aztecs, one of four unplayable factions. By this stage, the invading factions will have discovered gunpowder and have far superior technologies to the Aztecs who make up for this with their massive numbers.**



Battles increase in complexity as the game progresses and new technology is discovered.



DEVELOPER PROFILE

Creative Assembly was founded by Tim Ansell in 1987. Initially a one-man show, Ansell ported games to different formats for various publishers. As the company grew, Creative Assembly took on more ambitious sports titles with EA before its genre-defining *Shogun: Total War* was released in 2000.

HISTORY

- **ROME: TOTAL WAR** 2004 [PC]
- **MEDIEVAL: TOTAL WAR** 2002 [PC]
- **SHOGUN: TOTAL WAR** 2000 [PC]

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

THE GRAND STRATEGY

MEDIEVAL: TOTAL WAR + RISK + CIVILIZATION III = MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR

"MORE INDIVIDUAL LOOKING TROOPS AND THE COMBAT ANIMATION SYSTEM IMMERSE THE PLAYER IN THE ACTION LIKE NEVER BEFORE"

BOB SMITH, CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

Like big armies? *Zulu*'s got nuthin' on *Medieval II*.

JOINT TASK FORCE





■ If you have enough explosives, virtually everything you can see can be levelled to rubble.

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

AND TONIGHT'S HEADLINES...

COMMANDOS 2	+	COMPANY OF HEROES	×	CNN	=	JOINT TASK FORCE

"THIS WILL APPEAL TO GAMERS WORLDWIDE BECAUSE THEY CAN COMMAND THE FRONTLINES IN TOMORROW'S MOST HAZARDOUS WAR ZONES"

PHILLIP O'NEIL, VU GAMES



PUBLISHER PROFILE

Vivendi Games has been involved with some of the biggest PC titles including *Half-Life, SWAT, Riddick* and *F.E.A.R.* On the strategy side of things, the company has a good track record with *Ground Control, Caesar, Empire Earth, StarCraft, Warcraft* and others under its belt.

HISTORY

- **CAESAR IV** 2006 [PC]
- **EMPIRE EARTH 2** 2005 [PC]
- **GROUND CONTROL 2** 2004 [PC]

WHY DREAM UP A FUTURISTIC SCENARIO WHEN THERE'S PLENTY OF WAR GOING ON RIGHT NOW?



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: VU Games
DEVELOPER: Mithis Entertainment
RELEASE: 15 September (US: Out Now)
GENRE: Real-Time Strategy
PLAYERS: 1-4

CONCEPT

An original RTS with a modern-day war setting that sacrifices some of the familiar traits such as resources for faster, action-led gameplay.

There are far too many real-time strategy games out there, and if you're not *Age Of Empires, Command & Conquer* or any of the other big names, getting noticed can be difficult. This is why developer Mithis has, quite sensibly, decided to try something a little different with *Joint Task Force*. Not only with the style of gameplay, but with the story and setting as well.

Most RTSs are set either in the fantasy/ future scenario or get tenuously linked to historical battles. This, however, cuts a little closer to the bone. Set in 2007, *Joint Task Force* visits conflicts in such countries as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, the Balkans, Somalia and Columbia. There are 20 missions in total, taking your United Nations replacement team to military hotspots all over the world. This is not a subtle choice on the part of the developer, but the missions are just about politically different enough from real-life events so as not to be completely offensive. It's a great move that automatically makes the on-screen action that bit more authentic.

This, along with the high level of detail, creates a realistic environment for the action – textures on buildings, detailed character models, realistic vehicles, grass blowing in the wind, weather, smoke effects, they all look good. You can take the camera right down into the action and still be impressed by what's on show. In fact, because of the way the gameplay runs, we were gutted that we couldn't zoom all the way in and jump right into the body of one of the soldiers. The huge battlefields you have to explore and the explosive short bursts of combat would be perfectly suited to a first-person shooter.

The gameplay is quite unlike the majority of real-time strategy games we've played.



Take control of an airstrip and start moving in some heavier support.

"THE EXPLOSIVE SHORT BURSTS OF COMBAT WOULD BE PERFECTLY SUITED TO A FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER"

It's fast paced and brutal right from the start. There's no messing around gathering resources, building armies and scouting out the opposition for half an hour before you consider an attack. Here you're straight in, moving your units from cover to cover and setting up pincer movements on enemy positions. Your force gathers size and power naturally as you play through the huge maps either through money-funded air drops or basic RPG-style character progression. If you can keep individual soldiers alive long enough they can be levelled up to 'Hero' and kitted out with extra items. These will then stay with you from mission to mission.

Levelling up characters helps your progress, but if you want enough firepower to control the map, you need to capture an airstrip. Once this is obtained you can use your earned money – the only resource in the game – to call in air strikes, tanks, armoured cars and so on. Without the airstrip, you're limited to basic drops like infantry units. However, one of the great features of *Joint Task Force* is your ability to use civilian vehicles. Cars, JCB diggers and so on can be commandeered for the purpose of your mission – handy if you're in need of some extra cover, a roadblock or the chance to get in close to an enemy base before they realise that you aren't one of the locals.

There are a lot of good ideas in *Joint Task Force* and, although the combat can occasionally feel a little basic, it's good to see a real-time strategy title that doesn't feel obliged to follow the classic mould.

WAR IS MONEY

Money is the fuel of war and in *Joint Task Force* you need to make sure that you have enough to keep your men going. Throughout the game you receive money based on your performance from the various countries that belong to the JTF. Problem is, like real wars, the media constantly scrutinises your every move. Plough a tank through a primary school or napalm some civilians and your sponsors will see it on their TV within minutes. Behave responsibly and carry out your missions efficiently to make sure you get a consistent stream of money. Sadly, you can't take the media out of the equation.



MADE MAN

SILVERBACK STUDIOS GETS ORGANISED

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation2, PC, Xbox
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Mastertronic
DEVELOPER: Silverback Studios
RELEASE: September
GENRE: Action-Shooter
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

■ It's another organised-crime game… but one worth playing, inspired by classic crime films and endorsed by real-deal wiseguys.

PS2 **Organised crime has been the meat and potatoes of games for years, and Sicilian crime-family, film-inspired games have been knocking around for the duration.** It's a popular genre, providing FPS and ARPG games with a ready backdrop of U-turn plots, bloody shootouts and interesting American-Italian stereotypes. So, on paper *Made Man* makes for a sensible albeit safe debut title for Silverback Studios to pick up where bankrupt Acclaim left off.

It's not an original start, but Silverback Studios has gone to great length to make *Made Man* as authentic as possible. It has collaborated with crime author David Fisher, former CIA operative Joe Pistone (aka Donnie Brasco) and former mob boss Bill Bonanno who states that *Made Man* is, "as real as it gets". While we're not about to argue with any ranking member of the Bonanno family, in these days of next-generation gaming we're slightly sceptical of any such claim.

Made Man does, however, appear to make good on Silverback Studios' promise of "Tarantino Style" meeting "*GoodFellas* Cool", comprising a series of playable flashbacks from protagonist Joey, underpinned by a strong narrative that continues even as you're painting the walls with wiseguy brains. It's both an effective tool in drawing the player into the storyline and highly reminiscent of both films. More importantly, if you've played the likes of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* and *The Godfather*, you'll be treading familiar waters; the movie homages ooze from the game's every pore.



■ Slow Time: it makes time slow. That's about it. We'd like to see an action game WITHOUT it, for once.

"MADE MAN DOES APPEAR TO MAKE GOOD ON SILVERBACK STUDIOS' PROMISE OF 'TARANTINO STYLE' MEETING 'GOODFELLAS COOL'"

The gameplay in *Made Man* is just as accessible as the plot. Similar to *GTA*'s controls, the movement and targeting system uses the two analogue thumbsticks and R1 trigger. Think *Vice City* with less legwork and more bullet dodging. *Made Man* is a completely linear third-person shooter, but makes up for its lack of freedom with more intelligent gunplay. At least, that seems to be the intention. As yet the implementation of several major features is less than polished.

Made Man incorporates several major ideas from other blockbusting games, such as 'Slow Time' from *Max Payne*, 'Jump to Cover' as in *Metal Gear Solid*, and ragdoll physics á là, well, almost any modern videogame you care to mention. In the game's current state of completion (around 70 per cent), Jump to Cover is horrifically clunky, and Slow Time proves little more than an interesting distraction.

However, from what we've seen thus far, *Made Man* is promising to be a game that will engage the mass market and secure enough of a fan base to warrant a sequel. It's intriguing then, that Silverback Studios has already announced its intentions for *Made Man* to be the first episode of a trilogy. A bold and ambitious statement for a fledgling studio as it's already walking in the footsteps of giants.





■ Use your environment wisely to jump to cover.


eMag

COMPANY OF HEROES


You cannot control individual soldiers, but the AI means they will act in a way appropriate to each situation.

"STUFF BURNS REAL GOOD IN MY GAME"

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: Relic
RELEASE: 29 September
GENRE: Real-Time Strategy
PLAYERS: 1 (2-8 Online)

CONCEPT

Ever wanted to fight in World War II? No, neither have we, and for all us cowards Relic has the next best thing.

Creativity and repetition do not make for happy bedfellows. After launching a successful product, the temptation is to retread the same ground with slight changes to the colour of the grass. It makes financial sense to recycle ideas – hence its widespread practice in the industry – but is the death of innovation and, on a personal level, creative fulfilment. Relic understood this conflict, and after a string of RTS successes, went back to the drawing board for *Company Of Heroes*.

Relic targeted the RTS elements it didn't like and coupled its existing knowledge with a desire to eliminate each problem, creating its best game to date. It isolated its concerns to three main areas: individual soldiers never seem real or valuable enough, compromising the RTS as an emotional experience; maps are too rigid, limiting tactical options and routes; and the emphasis on collecting resources extends play time to silly levels. On the strength of its latest build, Relic has succeeded in two of these respects. We'll get to the other one later.

Each level is designed to allow as much tactical freedom and movement as possible, though in early levels common sense suggests which route is most viable. The sandbox element comes into play heavily in later levels – particularly those with tanks. One of *Company Of Heroes'* innovations is the destructible environment. Throw a grenade into a house and it explodes, but these physics allow the masonry to crumble realistically – with a tank, this can be to your advantage. In one instance, we flanked a mortar team by ploughing through a series of brick walls, using the tank for cover. In another we lured Nazis into an ambush by knocking a house across the other available route. Cover is king in most war games, but *Company Of Heroes* gives it a new tactical dimension. Resources are not so much collected as won.

Besides your major objectives, there are several strategic points on each map, that, when captured, give you extra munitions and supplies, and also allow you to call in reinforcements. Dynamism is key to the game's appeal, and removing the hours of resource collecting in favour of a more integrated approach helps keep the action fast and the adrenaline up.

Relic's final goal – that of creating a sense of emotional value to each soldier's life – is less well handled. It is understandable for a developer to want to increase emotional depth, but the responsibility of creating empathy seems to rest on the shoulders of over-long and intrusive cut-scenes. Rather than find a way unique to its medium, Relic has simply plagiarised cinema and slotted it in between the gameplay. It is especially jarring when the developer punctuates its sincerity with cries of, "It looks totally cool seeing a body flying 30 feet in the air". This inconsistency is only a problem because of Relic's insistence that it had solved it. With the embarrassment of the riches *Company Of Heroes* offers, it's a wonder it lingered over the one thing it hadn't, and perhaps couldn't get right.

"COVER IS KING IN MOST WAR GAMES, BUT COMPANY OF HEROES GIVES IT A NEW TACTICAL DIMENSION"

SPIELBERG SUCKS

No matter what the genre or which platform, a multi-player function is always good news. That chance of a few extra hours' gameplay can often be the difference between a pass-over and a purchase, and *Company Of Heroes* will allow up to eight players to go head to head as either the Allied or the Axis powers. The real icing on the cake, however, is the promised 'Moviemaker' tool, which will allow you to edit your skirmishes into miniature cinematic masterpieces. This function is common in racing games, but the chance to blow each other to holy hell before sweating it out over the highlights package seems a tempting prospect.




The physics engine ensures that every explosion has the effect of a real detonation.



DEVELOPER PROFILE

Relic is fast becoming an indispensable RTS developer. Kicking off its career with the well-received *Homeworld*, Relic has continued to fill the RTS genre with fresh ideas and innovation. *Impossible Creatures* and *Dawn Of War* suggested it was a company with diverse abilities, and *Company Of Heroes* should establish it as top of the game.

HISTORY



- **THE OUTFIT** 2006 [Xbox 360]
- **DAWN OF WAR** 2004 [PC]
- **IMPOSSIBLE CREATURES** 2003 [PC]



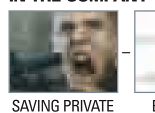
The tanks increase tactical possibilities by allowing you to create new paths for your squad.





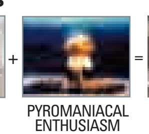
VIDEOGAMES MATHS

IN THE COMPANY OF HEROES



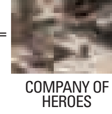
SAVING PRIVATE RYAN

−



EMOTIONAL POWER

+



PYROMANIACAL ENTHUSIASM

=

COMPANY OF HEROES

You have complete control of the camera, allowing you to micro-manage any part of the conflict.

"EXPERIENCE CINEMATIC INTENSITY SET AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THE MOST DYNAMIC BATTLEFIELD EVER SEEN IN A GAME"

THQ PRESS RELEASE

PARAWORLD



■ *ParaWorld's* camera can be zoomed right into the action although it's difficult to play from this angle.

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

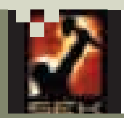
WALKING WITH DINOSAURS

AGE OF EMPIRES + DINOSAURS × IMPRESSIONISM = PARAWORLD

■ All your hard work is destroyed whenever the local beasts attack.

"THE ARMY CONTROLLER EVOLVES THE GENRE AND GOES BEYOND THE TYPICAL RTS INTERFACE"

SEK PRESS RELEASE



DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ SEK – short for Spieleentwicklungskombinat – was founded in 1998 by Thomas Langhanki, Carsten Orthbandt, Ingo Neumann and Carolin Batke as a specialist in real-time strategy games. Having already created one title, the developer hopes to build a reputation for producing top-notch graphics and gameplay.

HISTORY

■ **WIGGLES/DIGGLES** 2003 [PC]



■ You spend as much time mining resources as you do fighting dinosaurs.



■ *ParaWorld's* artistry is delicious. A rich looking game with a lot of potential.

WHEN DINOSAURS RULED THE EARTH

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: SEK
RELEASE: Out Now
GENRE: Real-Time Strategy/ God Game
PLAYERS: 1 (2-8 Online)



CONCEPT

■ Build a civilisation of dinosaur-breeding warriors and take your Jurassic army into battle against fierce enemy tribes.

Call us crazy, but when we hear that a videogame is set to feature dinosaurs in a big way then we expect action of the highest order. A dinosaur game without blood and gore just isn't worth playing, and that's the biggest problem that *ParaWorld* faces in its current form. For all its beard-stroking strategic elements – as well developed as they are – the core feature of the game is nowhere near as exciting as it could be. For at least the first six levels, the most terrifying dinosaur you're likely to see is the plant-eating, not-that-scary-after-all kind. Instead of jumping straight into the action, *ParaWorld* forces the player into the slow, laborious task of building houses and (yawn) picking berries. That's not exactly the violent, lizard war we dreamed of upon first setting eyes on the game.

Ignoring the fact that it requires many hours to get to the best dinos, there is a decent interface and control system here that makes for an intuitive and simplex strategy game. Everything is entirely controlled by the mouse – not a single keystroke is required – with the left button used to select troops and buildings and the right button used to assign troops to certain tasks. All commands are context sensitive so there's no messing around with on-screen icons. Want to send a group of workers to cut down a tree? Then left-click on the workers and right-click on the tree. It couldn't be any simpler.

During battle, the interface really shows what it's made of as SEK's patented 'Army Controller' comes into play. The controller, an unobtrusive drop-down menu on the left of the screen, allows all of the troops and tamed dinosaurs to be monitored at all times, and issued with commands whether they can actually be seen on screen or not. In the biggest battles where warrior units might be separated from the base, the Army Controller can be useful for keeping track of and dictating the action without having to scroll back and forth between units.

> "A RICH, DETAILED WORLD THAT TAKES ON A HAND-PAINTED IMPRESSIONISTIC APPEARANCE"

Special mention should also go to the game's visuals. Although it barely pushes the best PCs on a technical level, *ParaWorld* is artistically impressive. The number of on-screen colours is vast and varied, creating a rich, detailed world that almost takes on a hand-painted impressionistic appearance. The game follows a day-to-night cycle that keeps the landscape looking fresh as shadows move with the sun and mist descends from the mountains. These incidental details would be wasted if the game constantly maintained a bird's-eye view but, thankfully, a quick flick of the scroll wheel will zoom the camera closer to the ground to give a better view of the beautiful environments or glory of battle.

SEK has certainly built a solid and intuitive engine for *ParaWorld*, so the potential is there to make a very impressive RTS. Our only wish is that by the time of release, it can tailor the game more toward the extreme action seen in their adverts rather than the dull, uneventful resource management of the preview levels.

ONLINEASAURUS

No PC game would be complete without the obligatory online multi-player modes and *ParaWorld* looks fairly comprehensive in this department. As well as the traditional Deathmatch and Team Deathmatch modes, SEK is promising Defender mode – a seven-against-one battle in which the defending player receives far greater resources than the attackers. A fourth mode entitled Domination is basically a Capture-The-Flag game in which pre-defined areas of the map must be conquered and defended for a set amount of time. While we haven't had the opportunity to test the multi-player modes at time of writing, we hope that they'll present a quick way of gaining access to the biggest dinosaurs without ploughing through the tedious colony-building levels.

RESERVOIR DOGS

■ Driving is pretty reckless, but a fun aside nonetheless.

"THE GAME GIVES YOU THE OPPORTUNITY TO PLAY THROUGH THE EVENTS OF THE FILM LEADING UP TO AND FOLLOWING THE BREAKDOWN OF THE HEIST"
EIDOS PRESS RELEASE

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

DOGS OF WAR

RESERVOIR DOGS – THE CAST + MICHAEL MADSEN = RESERVOIR DOGS





■ Hostage taking is integral to *Reservoir Dogs*. It really is all you do.



DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Volatile is a department of the UK-based Blitz Games, and *Reservoir Dogs* is its first game to hit the market. Aside from this most lucrative of film licences, Volatile is also working on the forthcoming zombie game *Possession* which is scheduled for a 2007 release on next-generation consoles.



HISTORY

■ **RESERVOIR DOGS** 2006 [Multi]



"RESERVOIR DOGS IS QUITE SIMPLY A GAME ABOUT TAKING HOSTAGES. LOTS AND LOTS OF HOSTAGES"

"ALL RIGHT, RAMBLERS, LET'S GET RAMBLING!"

It's a subject we've touched on before in film licences that don't rest on their laurels. *The Warriors*, *The Godfather*, *Scarface*, *Path Of Neo* – all licensed games that have chosen to expand on their movies' respective universes, and examples of developers taking advantage of the medium rather than recreating the movie scene-for-scene. *Reservoir Dogs*, we're pleased to say, is another. This is especially good news as a videogame about men standing in a small room spouting cool dialogue doesn't really appeal.

Instead of retreading Tarantino's masterpiece, Volatile games lets players fill in the gaps. Ever wondered how the boys escaped the heist, or where Mr Pink stashed the diamonds? Now you can find out. In our brief two-level hands on, we spent time with a Steve Buscemi lookalike (in the loosest sense of the word), and took a drive with Nice Guy Eddie. However, all of the main characters will be playable at some point during the game, with the timeline constantly shifting, Tarantino style, as you flit between different points of the story. Even so, we'd be amazed if Volatile included a Mr Orange level, unless it was a *Trauma Center*-style exercise in minimising blood loss and affecting an American accent.

Nevertheless, everyone is present and correct although only Michael Madsen's Mr Blonde gets the full likeness and voiceover treatment (that man LOVES his games work). The rest of the cast is handled by solid soundalike talent, although the characters themselves look as close to the real deal as *Bad Boys II*'s Smith and Lawrence. Still, dialogue is fast and furious with Mr Pink in particular whipping out the New York venom.

Pink's level tells the story of his attempt to retrieve the diamonds from the hiding place located in a deserted train yard. The place is crawling with police, and, to get through, players will have to use their brains more than their trigger fingers. *Reservoir Dogs* is quite simply a game about taking hostages. Lots and lots of hostages. A simple stab of a button is all it takes to grab your nearest foe, and from there all manner of fun can be had.

For starters, the other cops/vigilantes/mall security guards will be more wary of you, and as such you can make a polite request that they relinquish their firearm and 'get up against that f***ing wall'. Of course, cops won't simply bow to your demands, so it pays to slap them about a bit until you get compliance. Once under your command, you can use the right analogue stick to direct your enemy anywhere – normally against the aforementioned wall – and then go about your business.

It's a fuss-free and well-executed system, but even during a single level it's appeal begins to wear thin. As you hold on to a hostage, their life will slowly deplete (or quickly if you bash them in the head), and so you must jump from hostage to hostage like a parasite looking for a host. It makes for a dull, repetitive experience, and while novel it can't sustain an entire game. This is presumably why Volatile has included amusing if totally daft linear driving missions to break up all the hostaging. As Nice Guy Eddie darted in and out of traffic, boosting into police cars and generally causing all sorts of unrealistic mayhem, we couldn't help pining for the subtlety of the movie.

Reservoir Dogs is already better than your average film licence. Time and effort has clearly gone into creating a believable and tangible Tarantino atmosphere, but unless the rest of the game's missions display a lot more variety, it's unlikely to be noticed next to the likes of *Gears Of War* and *Vice City Stories* this winter.

■ You can see why Volatile chose not to set the whole game in one room.

WOO KNEW?

Our memories of the movie may be slightly hazy, but not one of us can remember a scene in Tarantino's classic where time slowed down and the camera panned dramatically around a character while they fired off shots like Dante in a tux. But this is *Reservoir Dogs* the game, and it has been decreed that no third-person action game can reach retail without bullet time. In practice, it works like *Gun's* Quickdraw mode and is followed by a stylish cinematically brutal cut-scene. If you activate your special move when in possession of a hostage, you'll proceed to beat them down, and everyone will drop their weapons. Yes, we know it makes no sense, but it's damn funny.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC, PlayStation2, Xbox
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Eidos
DEVELOPER: Volatile
RELEASE: Q3 '06
GENRE: Action
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

■ The game of the 14-year-old movie. Players take control of every one of the film's main characters and take hostages. Lots of hostages.

SCARFACE: THE WORLD IS YOURS


It's amazing how things can end up if you imagine what would have happened…



"CRUISING SOUTH BEACH DURING A MIAMI SUNSET IS AS PLEASURABLE HERE AS IT IS IN VICE"

HANDS ON WITH THE KING OF THE MOUNTAIN

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC, PlayStation2, Xbox
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: VU Games
DEVELOPER: Radical Entertainment
RELEASE: Q3 '06
GENRE: Action
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

Essentially the REAL *Vice City*, play as Tony in an alternate universe where he survived the assault on his mansion.

Tony Montana really is the perfect game character. Shallow, hugely charismatic, hilariously funny and very, very violent. He's the kind of guy, who men just want to be – the money, the power, the women… *Scarface* has captured it perfectly. Voiced by an excellent sound-a-like and featuring Pacino's real-life likeness, *The World Is Yours* effigy of Senor Montana is superb – twitchy, arrogant, quick-witted and ballsy. Exactly how he should be.

For those out of the *Scarface* loop, the game takes place three months after the end of the movie, and in an alternative universe where Tony survives the assault on his mansion. You are placed in Montana's shoes as he strides his magnificent balcony, screaming cocaine-fuelled insults and letting rip with an AK47. There's a twisted violence to *Scarface* that proves quite shocking – far harsher than *GTA* but without ever feeling gritty. Admittedly, after the 30th decapitation, desensitivity kicks in and the glorious cartoonishness of it all takes over, but this is still one bloody videogame.

Upon survival and escape from the mansion, Montana is left with nothing. And therein lies the premise of *The World Is Yours* – you have to guide Tony through the beautifully realised streets of Miami and lead his charge back to the top of the food chain. It's a *GTA* clone – a *Vice City* clone to be exact – and makes no bones about it. The humour, the police chases, the way you collect missions – all conspicuously similar. But at least this is a game that warrants the open-city treatment. After all, what bigger influence was there on *Vice City* than Brian De Palma's seminal movie?

So, while originality and subtlety have been left somewhere back in Cuba, the game's fundamentals are proving strong. Combat is simple, with auto targeting, oceans of ammo and an always-amusing Taunt button – while the driving feels loose and responsive enough to remain fun. Cruising South Beach during a Miami sunset is as pleasurable here as it is in *Vice*.

Unfortunately though, *Scarface* is a game competing on a level with the *GTA* of 2002. There's no denying its solidity, its witty script and clever in-jokes (the interracial buddy cops that turn up to give Tony hassle are pure *Miami Vice*), but it's impossible to shake the feeling that it has already been eclipsed by a two-year-old game – *GTA: San Andreas*. Still, this is no *50 Cent*-style travesty; we look forward to spending more time with Tony over the coming months.


Grand Theft Auto Al Pacino style. *Scarface* needs to be different to stand out.


eMag

CAESAR IV

THE WORLD'S MOST POPULAR ROMAN CITY BUILDER IS BACK

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: VU Games
DEVELOPER: Tilted Mill Entertainment
RELEASE: 26 September
GENRE: Strategy
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

City building, Roman style. Improved visuals, environmental behaviour and civilian AI. Just a hell of a lot more comprehensive than ever before.

Ancient Rome is the place to be if you want to build a virtual city. We've had the Meier-inspired *CivCity: Rome* courtesy of 2K Games, *Heart Of Empire: Rome* is coming later in the year from the Milton Keynes-based Deep Red, and the most popular of them all, *Caesar*, is making a valiant comeback, bigger, better and bolder than ever before.

For anyone not familiar with the *Caesar* games, their concept is deceptively simple. Behind the stats, grids and other confusing city-building traits lies a story of a lowly peon tasked by the current Caesar to start building a city. As you progress, you move up the ancient Roman ranks, with the eventual goal of becoming Caesar yourself. As you can tell from these screenshots, *Caesar IV* marks the series' first foray into the world of 3D, and Tilted Mill isn't scrimping on the details. HDR lighting, bump mapping and all sorts of other wonderful graphical tricks are being used in abundance making for a vivid and lifelike environment that's a far shout from the sprites of old.

As opposed to building Rome itself, the senate will task you with expanding the empire. You may be based in southern Italy, northern Europe or even the Middle East, and the game alters dramatically dependent on your surroundings. For example, if you're based in the Arabian Desert, the terrain will obviously be very sandy and rocky with little rain and sparse vegetation. Quite a difference from the luscious Mediterranean stomping grounds of Sicily, where fruit and veg flow like the Tiber.

> "HDR LIGHTING, BUMP MAPPING AND ALL SORTS OF OTHER GRAPHICAL TRICKS ARE BEING USED IN ABUNDANCE MAKING FOR A VIVID AND LIFELIKE ENVIRONMENT"

No matter where you begin your city-building duties, there will be between 20 and 30 missions to keep you occupied, divided into two types: economic and military. During one mission, you may be upping the country's finances by producing a bountiful harvest, while another will have you building fortifications to fend off the Gauls. It offers a nice degree of variety, and makes a change from the usual financial micro-management that dominates this genre. Not that there's a lack of statistical analysis, though.

As ever, *Caesar IV* is a deep, complex game and, as such, careful manipulation of trade routes, farmland positions and other such exciting things is crucial. Tilted Mill is adamant that *Caesar IV* is the most accessible in the series to date, and is using the power of modern PCs to make the game far more organic than in days gone by. You can now physically watch every aspect of your city in action – workers visibly carry the grain to market, civilians actually travel to the Circus Maximus to watch a show, and people generally go about their daily business in full.

The path to becoming Caesar is indeed rocky, and if you don't keep the money rolling in the powers that be will likely start interfering in your day-to-day business. Continue to annoy the current Caesar and there's every chance that he'll come and attack you, forcibly removing you from office.

Caesar IV is shaping up to be the most comprehensive game in the series so far, and is an extremely strong contender for *CivCity*'s current Roman-city-builder throne. With lovely visuals, ocean-deep gameplay and plenty of variety to boot, it will undoubtedly please the PC populace when it arrives in the near future.

THE TAX MAN

The key to success in *Caesar IV* is to bleed your civilians dry with all manner of extortionate taxes. Obviously, your low-level workers will pay income tax on their earnings, and if you can manage to keep them happy enough to build pleasant accommodation, it will attract a higher class of citizen. The posher the denizens, the more tax money you'll receive, and you'll keep Caesar off your back for another day. Fill your town with aristocracy and you'll be rolling in it. It's all about squeezing the little guy for every penny he has.



Entertaining your citizens is the key to success and prosperity.





DEVELOPER PROFILE

Tilted Mill Entertainment is a relative newcomer to the industry, having only worked on the PC title *Immortal Cities: Children Of The Nile* in 2004. Based in Maryland USA, the team hopes to make a name for itself with the first 3D edition of the ever-popular Caesar franchise.

HISTORY

IMMORTAL CITIES: CHILDREN OF THE NILE 2004 [PC]

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

CAESAR PLEASER

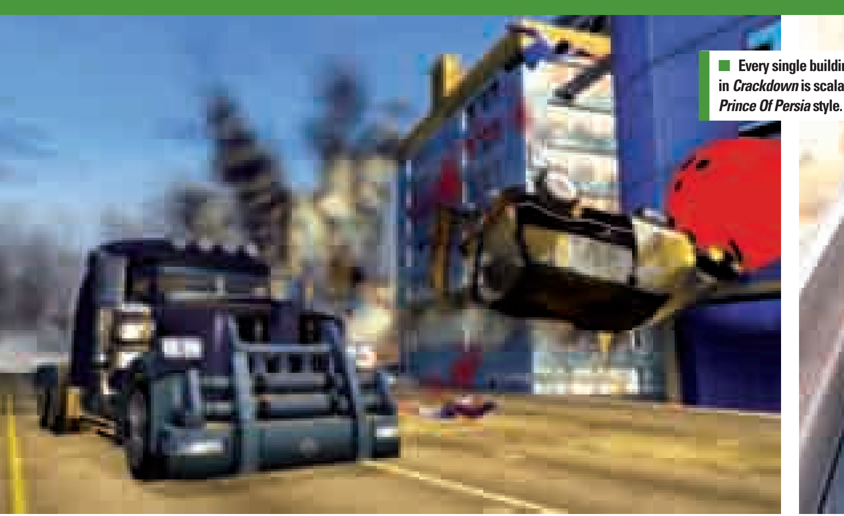
CAESAR 3 + CIVCITY: ROME × 3D = CAESAR IV

"CAESAR IV ENABLES PLAYERS TO EXPERIENCE FIRST HAND THE VASTNESS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE"
VU GAMES PRESS RELEASE

Building near water will open up trade routes and allow for a fishing industry.

Environments are now more expansive than ever, Tilted Mill has really gone to town on the game's visuals.

CRACKDOWN





Every single building in *Crackdown* is scalable, *Prince Of Persia* style.

VIDEOGAMES MATHS

LAYIN' THE CRACKDOWN

GTA + SPIDER-MAN 2 × PURPLE = CRACKDOWN

"CRACKDOWN PLAYERS ENFORCE JUSTICE AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF A CRIME-RIDDEN METROPOLIS THAT IS MASSIVE IN SCALE, MONSTROUS IN SCOPE AND METICULOUS IN DETAIL"
MICROSOFT PRESS RELEASE



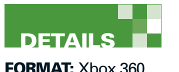
DEVELOPER PROFILE

■ Real Time Worlds is the baby of Dave Jones, the mind behind *Lemmings, GTA* and many other classic titles. This is the company's first game and a statement of intent. No linear plot, completely freeform and one of the very first titles to fully take advantage of the achievement system.

HISTORY

■ CRACKDOWN 2006 [Xbox 360]

REAL TIME WORLDS' VERY PURPLE TAKE ON THE 'SANDBOX'



FORMAT: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Real Time Worlds
RELEASE: October
GENRE: Action
PLAYERS: 1-2

CONCEPT

■ An entirely freeform city-based crime game, with a superhero agent in the lead role, and a bold if slightly misguided visual style.

With *Saint's Row, Just Cause* and *Crackdown* all making an appearance in this month's games™, it's high time the industry came up with a decent name for this new genre. We've had 'sandbox', 'free-roamer', 'city-based game' and the tiresome '*GTA*-clone', but none of them really roll off the tongue like 'FPS' or 'RPG', do they? Sandbox is the closest, but it makes little sense – all we remember playing with in a sandbox was sand. So, during our time in Dundee, in the company of the development team at Real Time Worlds and a number of other journalists, we took it upon ourselves to come up with the answer.

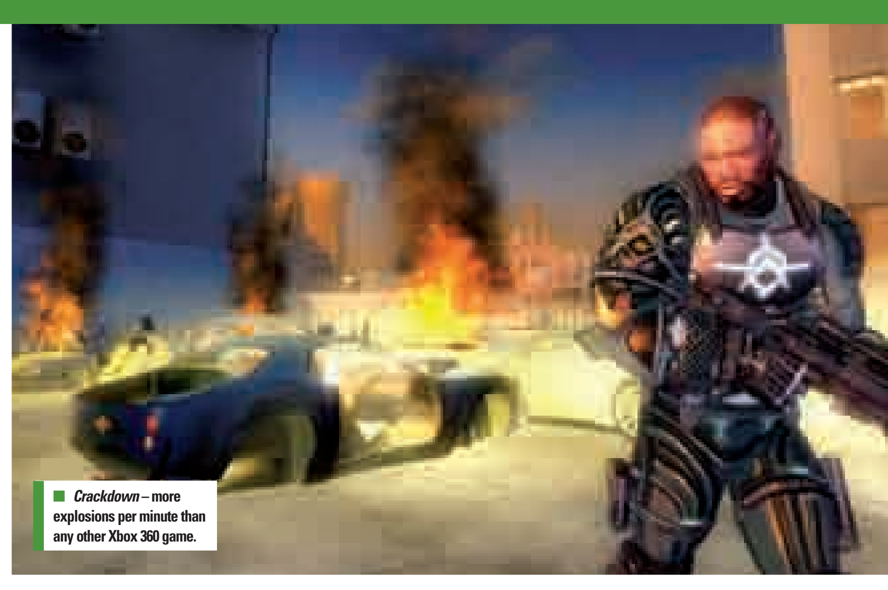
The best we managed? Urban Freeform Adventure (UFA). It will either spread like wildfire or be forgotten about before the end of this preview. Still, we're determined to persevere. *Crackdown*, Real Time Worlds' debut, is every bit a UFA. It's based in a fabricated US town called Pacific City, it's an adventure, and it's absolutely freeform. There's no linear story, no jarring cut-scenes and no A-to-B path in order to complete the game. Just a huge environment – run by three different gangs – and you. An agent tasked with 'cleaning up the city', Travis Bickle-style. Except Travis Bickle couldn't pick up trucks.

Crackdown's ethos is far more 'superhero' than 'antihero'. Using a very well implemented RPG-lite levelling up system that remembers every single action you take in the game world, you can build your character into a one-man crime-ridding machine. A fully powered up hero can leap 50 metres in the air, hurl articulated lorries around like a Frisbee and blast a perp's kneecap from half a mile away. It's incredibly empowering to be able to leap around the city across rooftops, while dealing death from above. It certainly doesn't feel like *GTA*.

Unfortunately though, at this stage, it's not all good news. For starters, the city is still far too purple. Like nothing else of this world, it's an odd choice of style and while the visuals on the whole are decent, the overuse of plum is genuinely upsetting. Also, seemingly keen to brag about the amount of action that the engine can cope with at any one time, the current build of *Crackdown* is far too hectic for words. You can't take two steps without fear of assault from any number of gang types, and if you accidentally catch a civilian in the crossfire, the entire police force will be after you too. Currently in the balancing stage, the game will hopefully be a slightly less insane experience come release.

Also erring on the side of 'mentally unbalanced' are the vehicles. The agency that you work for provides a sports car, SUV and truck, all of which can be levelled up. Driving in any of them is nuts. The sports car throws civilian vehicles into the sky like a supercharged *Robot Wars* winner, the SUV flies into the air upon contact with anything, and the truck makes *everything* explode. A simple trip to the shops can cause genocide.

At this stage, *Crackdown* is a game with huge potential, but one that needs to be severely balanced and bug tested in order to be successful. It's hugely ambitious, hilariously funny (especially in Co-op mode) and suitably different to *Grand Theft Auto*. A new dawn for the UFA? Potentially.



■ *Crackdown* – more explosions per minute than any other Xbox 360 game.



■ That, good sirs, is funny. It's even funnier when it hits your buddy's head.

"YOU'RE AN AGENT TASKED WITH 'CLEANING UP THE CITY' TRAVIS BICKLE STYLE. EXCEPT TRAVIS BICKLE COULDN'T PICK UP TRUCKS"

WHO NEEDS ENEMIES?

Remember how funny it was in *Halo* to pop a round of needles in your buddy's back then watch him explode as he screamed expletives at you? Well, instead of needles, imagine you throw a lorry in his face. We laughed to the point of fist banging on desks and tears streaming down faces, such is the hilarity of *Crackdown's* two-player online co-op mode. And the news that RTW intends to release a 16-player city-wide deathmatch as DLC is music to our ears.

DEEP LABYRINTH

NOT JUST DEEP IN NAME, WE HOPE

DETAILS

FORMAT: Nintendo DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Atlus
DEVELOPER: Marvelous Interactive
RELEASE: 8 August
GENRE: Action/ Role-Playing Game
PLAYERS: 1

CONCEPT

■ Swords, spells and dungeon-crawling monsters; this reeks of classic RPG goodness with a bit of DS magic.

When Nintendo came up with Game Boy, RPGs were probably last on the list of likely genres for portable gaming. After all, they usually require a significant investment of time and commitment in the storyline. The original portable console seemed destined for lighter entertainment like puzzle, platform and action games – much like its Game & Watch predecessors.

The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening proved that plot-heavy RPGs could be a spectacular success on Game Boy, and in its wake there have been a slew of console-to-handheld ports and re-writes across the portable market. With both DS and PSP comprehensively exceeding the power of some early consoles, these days there's no excuse for a shallow RPG on a handheld.

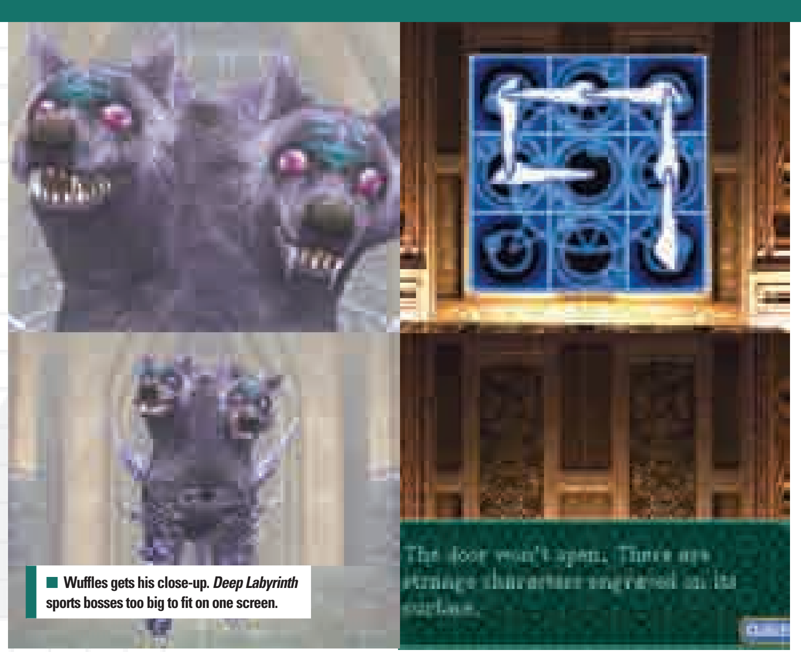
Deep Labyrinth comes from humbler origins than most. It's been dumbed-up for DS by Japanese developer Marvelous Interactive, having originally been developed for mobile phones. This move to console can only be a huge improvement on the original, surely? It's developed in collaboration with scenario designer Masato Kato of *Chrono Trigger* and *Final Fantasy VII*, and composer Yasunori Mitsuda á là *Mario Party* – we therefore expect an evocative ambience.

As an ARPG, you'd expect a real-time element, and one of *Deep Labyrinth's* USPs is being the first DS game with real-time first-person combat. Having been spoiled by first-person swordplay in titles like *Thief: Deadly Shadows* and *Oblivion*, combat seems awkward and cumbersome by comparison – though still an admirable effort for DS.

Anyone familiar with Ubisoft's recent ARPG *Lostmagic* for DS will recognise the use of the stylus for magic. Spellcasting consists of drawing esoteric symbols on the touch screen to conjure the baddie-bashing spell of your choice. It's an innovative way to take advantage of one of DS's unique technologies, providing a magic system that could otherwise have become a mundane push-button menu option. This is fast becoming a proven RPG feature that we'll no doubt see more of on DS.

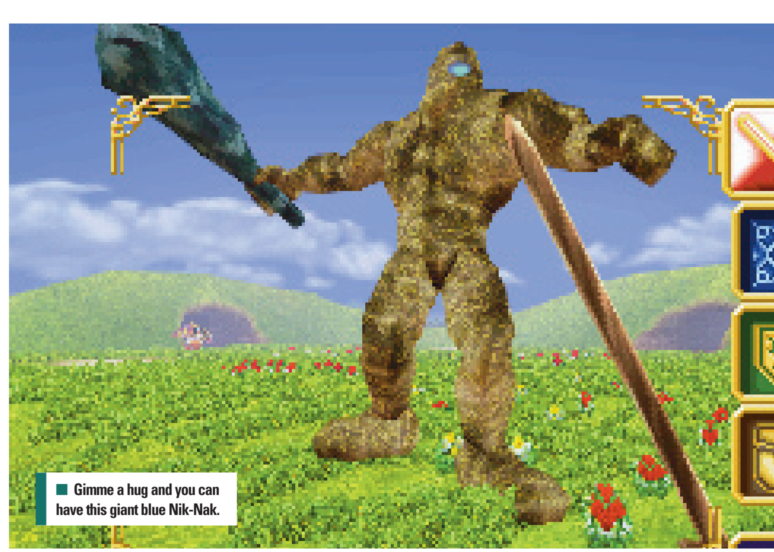
Deep Labyrinth boasts two scenarios: an RPG-lite situation for newbies, and one for role-playing veterans. It's hard to envisage how the vanilla scenario will be realised as both the plot (save parents from monster) and gameplay seem fairly unsophisticated. Nevertheless, *Deep Labyrinth* appears to bear the hallmarks of a solid role-play experience, and we're looking forward to its impending release.

"THIS MOVE TO CONSOLE CAN ONLY BE A HUGE IMPROVEMENT ON THE ORIGINAL, SURELY?"



■ Wuffles gets his close-up. *Deep Labyrinth* sports bosses too big to fit on one screen.





■ Gimme a hug and you can have this giant blue Nik-Nak.


eMag

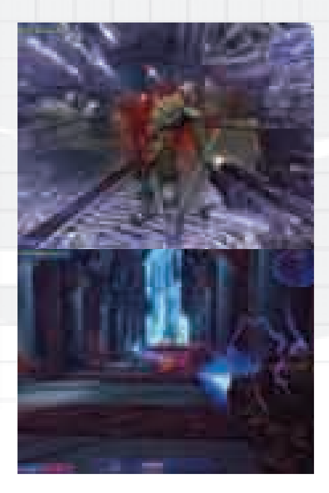
SHOWCASE

MORE THINGS TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

TIMESHIFT

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Format: Xbox 360, PC
Origin: US
Publisher: Sierra
Developer: Saber Interactive
Genre: First-Person Shooter
Players: 1 (2-16 Online)



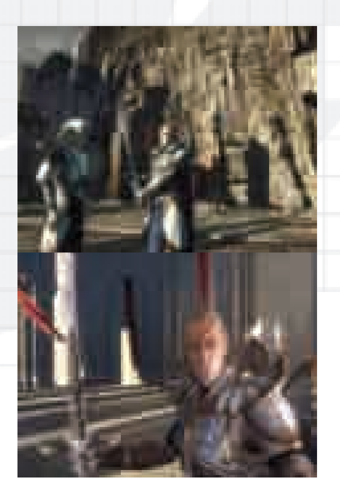
Saber's first-person shooter has already generated a great deal of interest which can be attributed mainly to its use of slow, stop and rewind time manipulation. We've played a short but sweet demo and we already predict players toying with the timeline, rewinding events to recreate them in all their gory detail. Top Hollywood voice talent has now been secured for *TimeShift*, further raising its profile. Nick Chinlund, Michael Ironside and Dennis Quaid are renowned for their action and sci-fi film appearances and give cinematic weight to the game's audio. We hope it plays as good as it sounds when it's released later this month.

RELEASE: Q4 '06

ELVEON

ELVES KICK ASS

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation3, PC
Origin: Slovakia
Publisher: 10tacle Studios
Developer: In-House
Genre: Fantasy-Action
Players: TBA



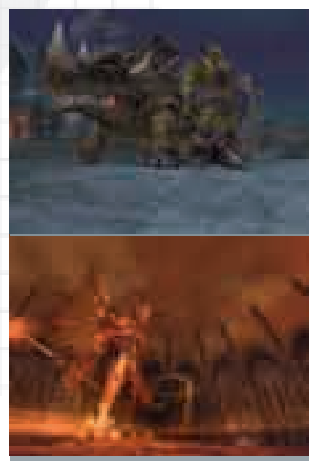
What with all the fuss surrounding *The Lord Of The Rings* and the incredible franchise that Peter Jackson's films have spawned, elven culture has experienced something of a rise in popularity in the last couple of years. *Elveon* is the first game in a long time that is dedicated to elves rather than elves in the general fantasy context. It uses the *Unreal 3* engine for its real-time combat system which draws upon elements of martial arts from a variety of backgrounds to form the unique fighting style of the elves. Could be a must for those who fancy themselves as Legolas – or even for those who just fancy Legolas, for that matter.

RELEASE: Q2 '07

ARCHLORD

KING OF THE HILL

Format: PC
Origin: Korea
Publisher: Codemasters
Developer: NHN Games
Genre: Fantasy-Action
Players: MMORPG



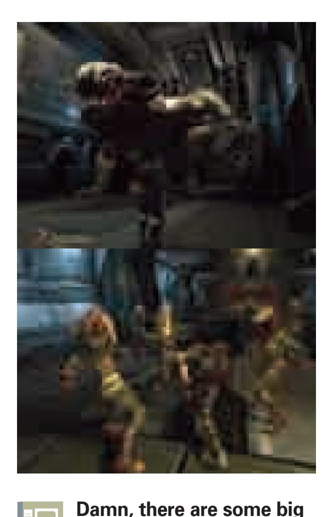
It's all very well being the meanest, most powerful badass in the land and whupping your AI opponents, but there's so much more satisfaction in knowing that there's a human being behind each character, that bows to your whim and covets your position. This is what we thought and obviously NHN Games thought so too, which is why it developed *Archlord*, a fantasy MMORPG based on PvP action that gives each player the opportunity to become the eponymous Archlord. Once you've reached the top, you're there for a month controlling the economy, the virtual lives of other players and the dragon mount you reign supreme atop. *Archlord* has serious fun potential.

RELEASE: Q3 '06

COLLAPSE

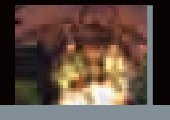
ALIEN ANNIHILATION

Format: PC
Origin: Ukraine
Publisher: Buka
Developer: Creoteam
Genre: Action
Players: TBA



Damn, there are some big beasties in this game. If the screenshots are anything to go by, Buka's latest action title, *Collapse*, is set to feature at least one *Turok*-scale monster. This in itself is quite exciting, but *Collapse* is set in an *Unreal*-style future Earth under continuous alien attack. Buka promises character movement that has been realistically replicated using motion-capture technology, a combat combination system and a comprehensive physics engine with hundreds of interactive elements throughout. It all sounds great on paper and the images that we've seen so far are impressive enough, but you'll have to wait until next year to judge for yourself.

RELEASE: Q4 '07



DELAYED – Two Worlds [PC] Winter

Zuxxez Entertainment's RPG has been pushed back, "We did not want to compromise the ground-breaking potential of this great game", says CEO Alexandra Constandache.



DELAYED – Spore [PC] Summer 2007

Originally slated for a late 2006 release, the creator of Electronic Arts' primordial E3 hit, Will Wright, has announced that the game will not be put on the market before July 2007.

FORD STREET RACING: LA DUEL

TEEEEEEEAAAAM

Format: PlayStation Portable
Origin: UK
Publisher: Xplosiv
Developer: Razorworks
Genre: Racing
Players: 1-6



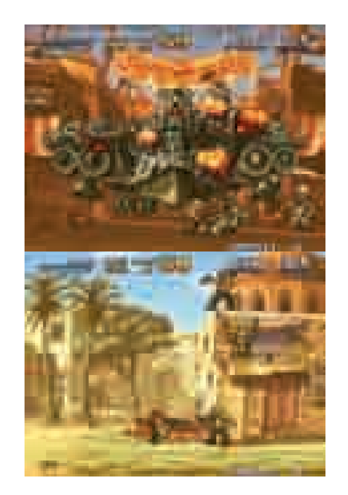
Xplosiv's new budget range of £19.99 PlayStation Portable games enters the over-crowded handheld racing genre with *Ford Street Racing: LA Duel*. Any fears of yet another me-too game have been quashed, however, by a surprisingly original take on the street racing sub-genre. Developer Razorworks has built the game around the concept of team racing wherein each player controls a set of two cars and must switch control between the two and race both of them to good final positions in order to win a race. Suitably simple controls and an enjoyable Wi-Fi mode make this one to watch for racing fans who are looking for something that little bit different from the norm.

RELEASE: 27 OCTOBER

METAL SLUG ANTHOLOGY

TANKED UP ON PSP

Format: PlayStation Portable
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Ignition
Developer: SNK Playmore
Genre: Run-And-Gun
Players: 1-2



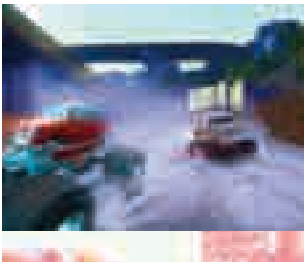
'Arcade perfect': two words that, when used together, reduce the games™ team to tears of joy. Give us exact replicas of our favourite coin-op games without the need to pump hundreds of coins into them and we'll be happy little magazine makers. This autumn should see us clutching our PSPs in rapture when Ignition releases SNK's long-overdue *Metal Slug Anthology*. Featuring perfect ports of *Metal Slug*s one to five plus *Metal Slug X* as well as enhanced widescreen modes, two-player Wi-Fi and plenty of bonus content, we simply cannot wait. The opportunity to play the original and best *Slug* on a handheld should be reason enough to pick up this enticing UMD.

RELEASE: Q3 '06

MONSTER 4x4: WORLD CIRCUIT

BIG WiiLS

Format: Nintendo Wii
Origin: US
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: In-House
Genre: Racing
Players: 1-4





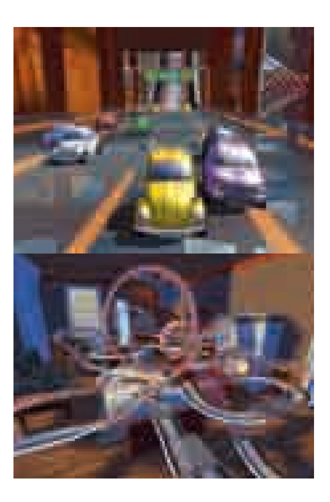
Previously an America-only Xbox release, *Monster 4x4* was a decidedly average monster truck game that has now been offered a second chance at success as a Nintendo Wii launch title. Confirmed features including vehicle customisation and four-player modes won't exactly set the world alight, and so Ubisoft will have to ensure that *Monster 4x4: World Circuit* takes advantage of Wii's wonder wand in order to stand out from the crowd. As a monster truck game, however, this will be in the unenviable position of direct competition with Nintendo's *Excite Truck*. On the other hand, perhaps the game's bubblegum-visuals will give it the graphical edge over the odds-on favourite.

RELEASE: Q4 '06

MAD TRACKS

PLAY GAMES AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE

Format: Xbox Live Arcade
Origin: US
Publisher: Load Inc
Developer: In-House
Genre: Racing
Players: 1-4



Downloadable racing game, *Mad Tracks* has been available on PC for several months now and will soon be coming to Xbox 360's Live Arcade service. The diminutive racing game, featuring toy cars in real-world environments, is obviously modelled on Codemasters' beloved *Micro Machines* series yet it differentiates itself by including 23 mini-games and the ability to make you a more likeable person. As unbelievable as it may sound, Load Inc's VP project manager, Thomas Leinekugel, claims that, "Most people who played this game are telling us their life is better now and that they have more friends". Life-improving videogames? Whatever next?

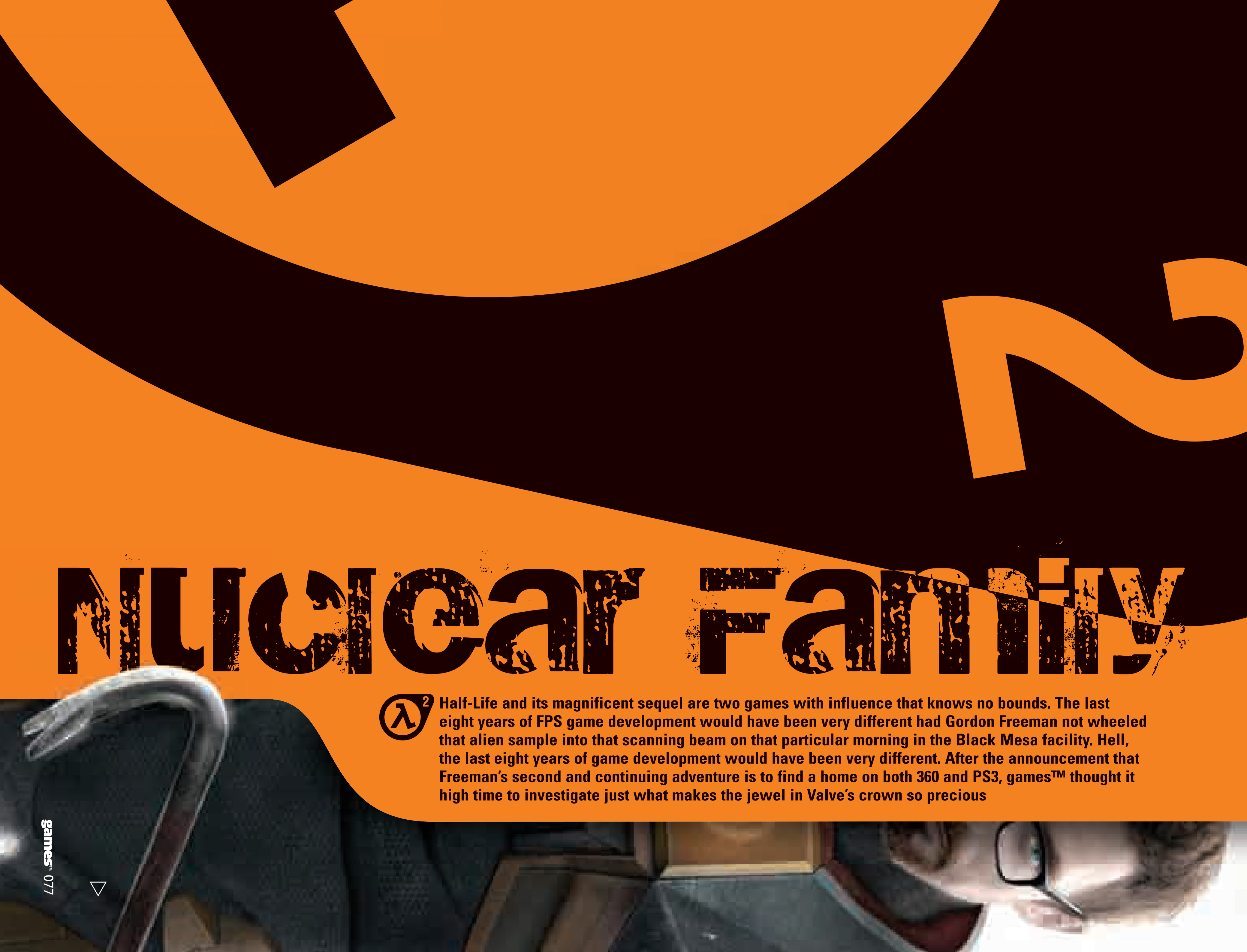
RELEASE: TBA





"You're ghostin' us, mother****er." **Pac-Mania, Mega Drive [Tengen] 1991**





Nuclear Family

Half-Life and its magnificent sequel are two games with influence that knows no bounds. The last eight years of FPS game development would have been very different had Gordon Freeman not wheeled that alien sample into that scanning beam on that particular morning in the Black Mesa facility. Hell, the last eight years of game development would have been very different. After the announcement that Freeman's second and continuing adventure is to find a home on both 360 and PS3, games™ thought it high time to investigate just what makes the jewel in Valve's crown so precious



Interview with Doug Lombardi



WE SAT DOWN WITH VALVE'S DIRECTOR OF MARKETING, DOUG LOMBARDI, FOR A BRIEF CHAT ABOUT ALL THINGS HALF-LIFE…

games™: How does Episode Two continue the Half-Life 2 story?
Doug Lombardi: In *Episode Two*, the player races across the wilderness north of City 17 to bring an information packet stolen from the citadel to an enclave of resistance scientists. The Combine are in disarray after the fall of the citadel, but are regrouping and advancing on the resistance position.

g™: Are there any surprises?
DL: Of course. We've revealed one new creature, the Hunter, and one new weapon, the Strider Buster. And there are many story surprises, technology updates, and other surprises in store for everyone who plays *Episode Two* on any platform.

g™: What enhancements have been made to the 360/PS3 versions?
DL: For *EpTwo*, *TF2*, and *Portal*, we will be leveraging the unique processing and networking capabilities of each system. We haven't announced specifics yet for those games, but we will closer to launch. Meanwhile, for *Half-Life 2* and *EpOne*, we will be doing fairly major graphic passes on each to bring them more in line with the look and feel of *EpTwo*. So, for example, *Half-Life 2* on PS3 and 360 will feature HDR lighting throughout the game, which was never seen on the PC versions.

g™: What are your plans for Half-Life 2: Episode Three, and how far do you see the series going in this episodic format?
DL: As a trilogy, this adventure will conclude with 'Episode Three' which is targeted for release during the holiday season of 2007. Once this trilogy is complete, we

Imagine, if you will, a world without *Half-Life*. If, back in 1998, Valve's sci-fi masterpiece had never been created, it could feasibly be argued that the first-person shooter may have faded out of the mainstream consciousness in a similar fashion to the platformer or point-and-click. After all, there's only so far the *Doom* aesthetic can go. The genre needed a saviour. Who would have thought it would be a bespectacled scientist named Gordon?

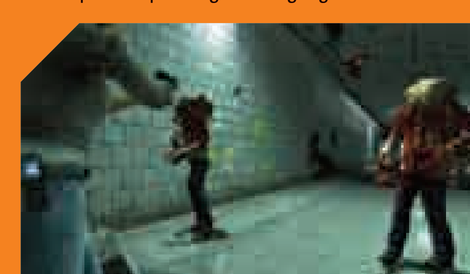
Half-Life dragged FPSs kicking and screaming into the new millennium. It can be likened to the *Matrix*'s redefinition of action cinema, or Oasis and Blur's reconstruction of British rock music – so bold, so inventive and so phenomenally influential, Valve's adventure was light years ahead of the competition – and its effect is still felt today, even before you factor in 2004's ground-breaking sequel.

So much of what *Half-Life* achieved in the late Nineties is now taken for granted. Take storytelling: it's an area where *Half-Life* can legitimately be called revolutionary. By placing the player behind the eyes of silent hero Freeman, *Half-Life* took a *Zelda*-esque approach to immersion. The player never spoke; you never see his face during play – you simply ARE him. This was Valve's MO for *Half-Life*'s storytelling – as game scribe Marc Laidlaw confirms, "Being Gordon is a very particular kind of experience; it's part of the essence of *Half-Life*". This notion is compounded by the masterful use of cut-scenes, or indeed the lack of cut scenes. By allowing players complete liberty of movement during 'cinematics', including the freedom to actually walk away from them, *Half-Life* shattered the traditional concept of game narrative techniques. Scientists conversed with you in real-time, action happened before you arrived… it all created a distinct sense of place, of an environment that truly lived and breathed. It felt like the Black Mesa facility existed and operated independently of the player: a believable game world and one of the first steps away from entirely solipsistic videogaming. Where action had previously been interrupted by cinema, it was now all under one umbrella – the game told you its story as you played. Modern games now utilise this technique in abundance, be it *Oblivion* or *Gears Of War*, we've reached the point where it has become just another part of game language.

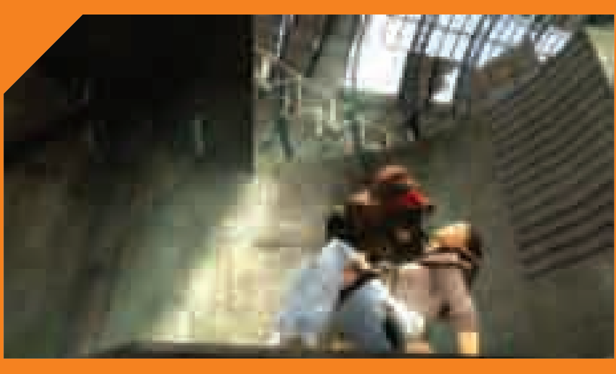


Half-Life 2 – better than *Cliffhanger*. Fact.





The Orwellian influences are clear to see.





It's still a lovely looking game.

REMEMBER THE OPENING scene – one of the most revered moments in gaming. Its virtues are extolled on many a gaming forum. But why? After all, you're simply sitting on a slow-moving monorail, with very little to look at apart from dark walls and the opening credits. But think how daring this was back in 1998 – an FPS, traditionally the most explosive, action-intense genre in all of videogaming, beginning with ten minutes of the absolute mundane. It set the tone for *Half-Life* perfectly – this was not a game that was content to simply follow the trends and traditions set by the genre's past – it was here to rebel. The opening ten minutes achieved something that few games even aspire to, and it's a factor that has directly contributed to the success of the series as a whole. It's all about pacing.

"Some pacing is deliberate and planned from the outset, but a great deal arises from playtesting," Laidlaw explains, "there's a tendency to throw everything into a map just because we have it. Then we find that the effect is too overwhelming, and the player isn't able to appreciate the experience." It's a salient point. Too few games pay attention to the peaks and troughs of excitement that occur throughout ▷

Expect full HDR lighting in the new versions.

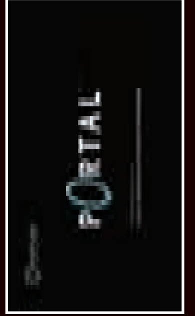
Portal





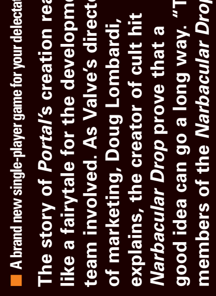
A brand new single-player game for your delectation.

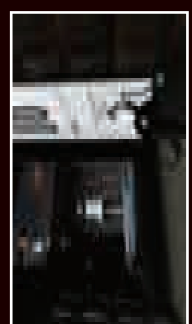
The story of *Portal*'s creation reads like a fairytale for the development team involved. As Valve's director of marketing, Doug Lombardi, explains, the creator of cult hit *Narbacular Drop* prove that a good idea can go a long way. "The members of the *Narbacular Drop* team were seniors at DigiPen Institute here in the Seattle area, and created ND as their senior class project which is shown at a showcase to local devs and publishers," he explains. "Some Valve folk attended, thought it was great and invited them to the offices to show everyone. Gabe immediately loved it and basically offered them jobs on the spot."



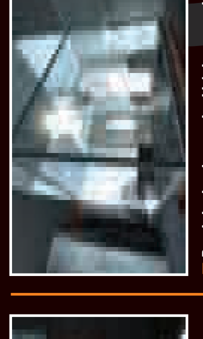
The visuals are of the same calibre as *Half-Life 2*

For those still in the dark about *Portal*, its name is somewhat of a giveaway. Imagine *Prey* but with the ability to create your own portals – one 'in', and one 'out'. To solve puzzles, you must use both. Confusing? Yes. Ingenious? Also yes. A good and simple example is the room with a pit in the middle – shoot the 'out' portal at the other side of the pit, the 'in' on your side, and walk through it. Easy. However, it doesn't stay easy for long. *Portal* is an entire game, a fully fledged single-player experience that will be bundled with *Episode Two* for free, and that, good sirs, is brilliant.

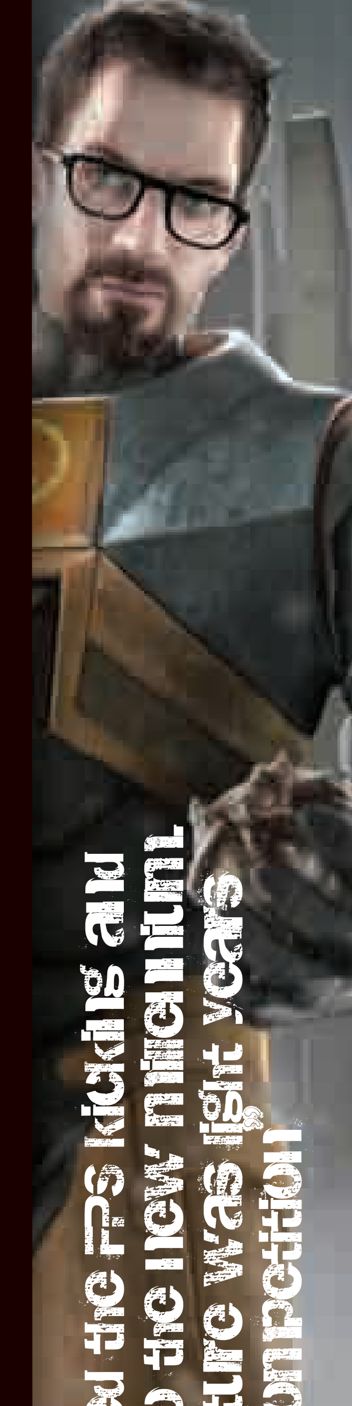




Innovation is *Portal*'s MO.



People in glass houses shouldn't throw portals.



"Half-Life dragged the FPS kicking and screaming into the new millennium. Valve's adventure was light years ahead of the competition"



Doug Lombardi continued...

will evaluate what comes next and in what format.

g™: Do you see episodic content as the future of gaming, and what do you see as its main benefits/ drawbacks (given the comments from Epic's Mark Rein at July's Developers Conference in the UK, who supported it only for Half-Life 2)?
DL: By moving to smaller and more regular releases of content, we've eliminated the burden of financial and schedule risks. *Portal* is a good example of doing something that would be too risky to try out in a traditional, multi-year, mega-million dollar project. It also allows us to move technology forward in steady steps and deliver new functionality faster than is possible with monolithic releases. HDR and our new lighting model are examples of technology we've shipped through Steam updates and in episodic releases since *Half-Life 2*'s launch. And soon a 360 and PS3 version of the engine will be available. The bottom line is that we're finding episodic development is allowing us to move our content and technology forward more efficiently.

g™: With an increased focus in the console market, do you think digital distribution will be a viable avenue for gamers with this generation of consoles, or do you think it will remain the preserve of PC gamers?
DL: All forms of electronic content will become more and more available through direct distribution while maintaining a presence at retail. Many have been exploring direct distribution via the PC for quite some time, so there's a natural lead on that platform. But there's no inherent reason why it must remain exclusively bound PCs.

g™: Being famed for listening to feedback from gamers, to what extent will you be considering console gamers' feedback?
DL: All customers are equal in our minds – in fact, we probably have more to learn from the console customers.



The Peter Crouch of the future.

their durations, instead shooting their load over the first few hours before descending into a mire of dockland and warehouse environments. It's largely to do with gaming's traditionally staccato structure – the concept of 'levels' plays havoc with any sense of continuity or verisimilitude. It's difficult to suspend your disbelief when you're constantly being yanked out of the game world. Cut-scenes help paper over the gaps, but *Half-Life's* (almost) constantly streaming world was the first progression into a deeper sense of reality that has permeated all areas of gaming since.

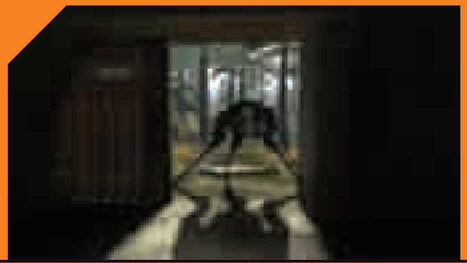
EVEN MORE, THE game used many cinematic and videogame techniques to differentiate between moments of extreme intensity, exploration or hideous tension. Who can forget the encounter with the clawed monster that reacts to sound? Gaming had never been that subtle before. It's almost as if the developer had a head start – it knew how to affect players in new and interesting ways, and everyone else simply had to follow suit. The same applies to the sequel. Take Ravenholm for example. Has there ever been a more despicable space in a videogame? Even *Silent Hill* can't match its sheer nastiness. An hour of overwhelming terror and intensity that carried a tangible sense of dread with every footstep. And don't get us started on those spider things. Its defining moment comes atop a small roof, as you wait for the priest to winch a platform your way to allow escape. You can hear the terrible noise of the mutants below, and then, with only a few square feet in which to manoeuvre, the drainpipes start twitching from left to right, and that once distant clanging is getting distressingly closer. You know those bastards are coming to get you, and there's not much you can do about it apart from clutch the shotgun and whisper a little prayer.

Of course, *Half-Life 2* brought far more to the table than perfectly pitched pacing, as 360 and PS3 gamers are soon to discover. The character models at the time were truly astounding. Although the likes of *Dead Rising* have improved upon *HL2's* facial animation and emotive range, they still haven't matched the depth of personality and idiosyncrasy that helped carve out *Half-Life 2's* engaging plot. Finally we had characters, outside the RPG genre, that we could care about. Pretty unusual for an FPS. It was an inevitable step for gaming – it was always coming but is indicative of *Half-Life's* influence and Valve's developmental prowess that *Half-Life 2* really gave birth to the digital actor.

HOWEVER, IT WAS a purely gameplay-based feature that defined, and continues to define, the modern *Half-Life* experience. Physics. Valve's tremendous Source engine lent *Half-Life 2* a realism that has been promised for years but rarely delivered. Stories of gamers spending hours throwing bottles at walls and cups at men, littered Internet forums



There's somebody at the door.





for months. The complete freedom to manipulate the game's environment led to a freedom of expression that is so rare in FPS gaming – you could literally tackle every set piece and situation however you saw fit. The gravity gun which, as *Half-Life 2* players know was like mana from heaven, is quite possibly the greatest innovation in the genre's history (along with *Halo's* energy bar), and single handedly turned *Half-Life 2* from a great game into a magnificent one. Again, using its rather uncanny precognitive skills, Valve focused more attention on representing reality through reaction rather than photorealism (not to suggest that *Half-Life 2's* graphics are anything less than stellar, of course), and again pre-empted the focus of many next-gen games. Realistic physics are becoming standard in all games these days, but it took Valve to show others the light.

So what can we expect from *Half-Life 2's* next-gen debut? Well, a better conversion than Xbox received last year, that's for sure. More important, though, is the huge volume of extras that will be included in the package. As you're most probably aware, Valve is pushing the medium forward once again with its commitment to episodic content. *Episode One* has already arrived to much critical acclaim, and to coincide with *HL2's* next-gen outing the PC will receive *Episode Two*. Almost as if to spoil us, Valve will include both *Episodes One* and *Two* in the console packages (up for full **games™** review treatment). Also, as detailed on these very pages, the consoles will be receiving new versions of *Team Fortress* and the spiritual sequel to *Narbacular Drop*, the exciting looking *Portal*.

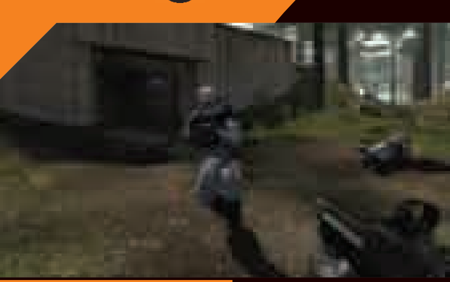
This can only be seen as fantastic news; consoles powerful enough to do *Half-Life 2* justice, and the continuation of one of the most fascinating stories in gaming history. But where does it go from here? Well, *Episode Two's* storyline is being kept under wraps, but we do know that it involved a race across a countryside riddled with an increasingly fierce Carbine threat. The firm's commitment to expanding the current *Half-Life 2* universe suggests that a true sequel may well be some time off, with 'Episode Three' slated for release a year from now. It would seem that those wanting to finish a trilogy in the foreseeable future may have to explore another little-known FPS beginning with H.

Nevertheless, *Half-Life 2's* console package will be an absolute treat. At least 30 hours of the main story to battle through, and countless hours of *Team Fortress* to come, it'll take some stiff competition to knock it from the top of the console FPS throne. Master Chief, take note – it's not going to be an easy ride after all.

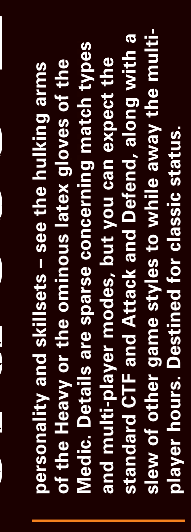


The Gravity Gun proved a huge hit with fans and brought a much needed new weapon to the FPS universe.





Team Fortress 2



After many years in the wilderness, the official sequel to probably the most successful mod of all time is nearly with us, and it's looking superb. Rendered in a unique visual style, *Team Fortress 2* looks more like a Pixar movie than your standard shooter, and each of the nine character classes has been sculpted in such a way as to reflect their personality and skillsets – see the hulking arms of the Heavy or the ominous latex gloves of the Medic. Details are sparse concerning match types and multi-player modes, but you can expect the standard CTF and Attack and Defend, along with a slew of other game styles to while away the multi-player hours. Destined for classic status.





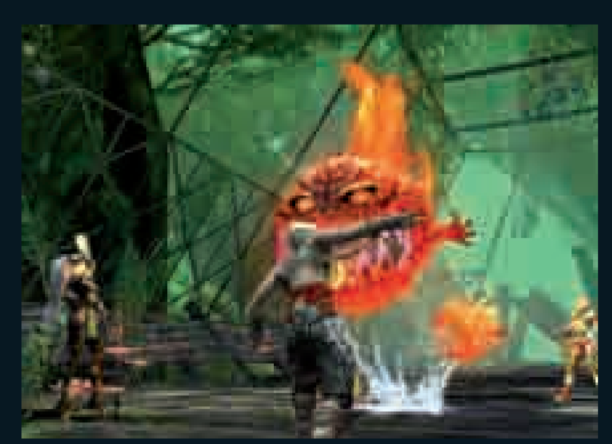
The games™ Bible – The Book Of RPGs



THIS MONTH, THE GAMES™ BIBLE SERIES DONS ITS CUIRASS AND LEVELS UP TO LOOK INTO THE WIDE WORLD OF THE ROLE-PLAYING GAME. WITH ALL THOSE RANDOM ENCOUNTERS, GENERIC PRINCESSES TO SAVE AND PAGES OF STATISTICS, IT'S A WONDER THAT PEOPLE PLAY THESE GAMES AT ALL, RIGHT? WRONG. PRECIOUS FEW GENRES HAVE HAD AS HUGE AN IMPACT ON THE VIDEOGAME SCENE AS THE RPG, AND WITHOUT THEM THE GAMING LANDSCAPE, AS WE KNOW IT, WOULD LOOK VERY DIFFERENT. WHY? WELL, READ ON AND YOU JUST MIGHT LEARN A THING OR TWO…

Elder Scrolls 1-4 Disgaea 1+2 Breath Of Fire Golden Sun Dragon Quest

Chrono Cross Xenosaga Secret Of Mana Mother 1-2 Shining Force



Hit. Hit. Explode.



We hate Goofy, always.

Escapism. These eight letters in sequence explain what gaming is all about better than any other combination that we can think of. Most people will never even sit in a Ferrari, let alone put one around the Nürburgring at breakneck speed. Not one of you reading this will ever be cybernetically enhanced and lead the charge against an alien invasion. And, in the real world, gathering a hundred of any given item – no matter how special – will not grant you the power to overcome death with an extra life. This is where games come in, turning everything you know to be true about the world upside down and granting access to worlds where anything is possible. And while pretty much every game represents some form of escapism, there's no genre that can draw you into another world as well as that of the role-playing game.

IT SHOULD COME as no surprise that the concept for computer role playing originally came from pen-and-paper affairs such as *Dungeons & Dragons* with many early releases being direct translations of rule sets and scenarios from the *D&D* universe, made in the bedrooms of fanatics. Indeed, the first several years following the conception of the genre saw a steady stream of *D&D*-inspired amateur releases, and, aside from the odd exception, that's how it remained until 1986 when the first console RPG was released. Enix's *Dragon Quest* – rebranded as *Dragon Warrior* for its 1989 US release for legal reasons – would set the ball rolling for what went on to become the company's flagship series, and paved the way for countless copycat titles.

Since its birth, two firms have been pivotal in the progression of the RPG genre. This pair has since combined forces to form a development superpower by the name of SquareEnix, but, prior to the merger, no developers did more to further the genre than these two Japanese giants. With *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*, for Squaresoft and Enix respectively, the two companies were bitter rivals with a common goal – to create the best RPG on any given platform. In this quest, the two happened upon a common necessity, namely the need for a strong and coherent narrative to hold the adventuring together and develop it into more than just a string of events and dungeon crawls.

A good traditional RPG needs to follow the same schematics as a good book. You need characters with whom you can identify, a setting that can hold the player's attention and a narrative strong enough to carry the game for the 40-odd hours for which it will last. Story has become such a prevalent part of many modern RPGs that some seem to have lost sight of the balance all together. *Xenosaga* springs immediately to mind with bite-size chunks of gameplay interspersed with lengthy cut-scenes to further the story, some of which even have save points as they are so long. With the growing power of (and familiarity of developers with) technology, this balance is becoming more and more important – the temptation to over-indulge in cinematic sequences will only ever detract from player involvement which, in turn, will make playing through a game feel more like sitting through a movie than the achievement it should.

SO THIS IS our first and most common kind of RPG, which we shall refer to as the 'traditional' RPG. In essence, this area of the genre has progressed little in the two decades since the original *Dragon Quest*. Individual combat systems borrow elements from other series or genres, of course, but that's usually where the differences end – at the heart of games from *Atelier Iris* to *Xenosaga* is the same core mechanic from some 20 years ago. With each new game comes a new set of characters, settings and abilities, and this is what keeps the genre



Defining Moments

1. Final Fantasy VII

SAYONARA, FLOWER GIRL

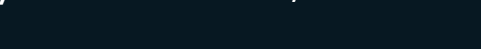
Aeris dies. There, we said it. Mind you, if you haven't played Squaresoft's definitive RPG in the ten years since its release, then shame on you – you deserve to have it spoiled for you. This remains a pivotal moment in RPG gaming is yet to be rivalled; the sheer audacity on Square's part to kill off such an important character defies all convention and has reduced many a grown man to tears. Even today, people are concocting new and more convoluted ways in which she can apparently be resurrected – everything from levelling up a Revive Materia past its maximum level in an obscenely time-consuming manner to using the Underwater Materia to trawl the seabed for her body – but the simple fact remains that her death is what drives the story forward so well. Without it, *Final Fantasy VII* wouldn't be anything like the classic we remember it as today. Mourn her, by all means, but accept the fact that she's gone, and move on. It's what she would have wanted.

"YOU CAN FIND INVOLVING RPG ACTION IN THE MOST UNLIKELY OF PLACES"

fresh. The subtle differences between the ways in which so many RPGs work make for a wealth of unique titles – different twists on real-time and turn-based battle mechanics; different ways of exploring the world; different manners in which to improve character abilities. There are so many variables that every individual is bound to quickly discover which way they prefer an element to be handled and then settle into a particular game or series accordingly. But it isn't all about doing things by the book. Indeed, if you look carefully enough, you can find deep and involving RPG action in the most unlikely of places.

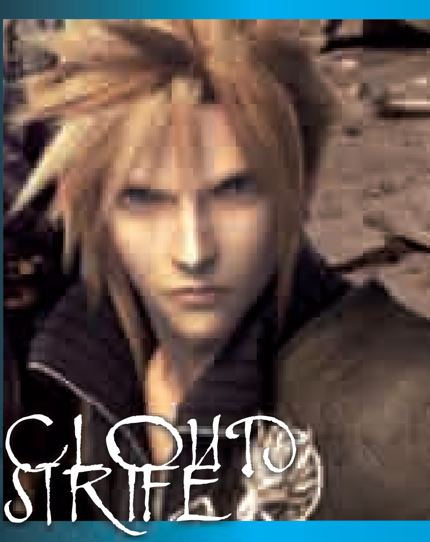
While vilified by some less-informed gamers, the *Pokémon* series is actually governed by a ridiculously complex rule set beneath its bubble-gum exterior. Indeed, all it takes is a quick Google search to find hundreds of in-depth dissections of the calculations and hidden stats that make the games tick – what to many may seem like a kids' game is in actual fact one of the most complicated RPG experiences available if you're willing to go that extra mile. It's actually possible to calculate the potential of any given monster, allowing you to train up only the finest wild creatures, and by carefully choosing which other monsters your crew defeats, stats can be boosted significantly in key areas. But even without this added depth, the *Pokémon* series is still up there with the best, offering hundreds of combatants and development options. The freedom to create a team that works together according to personal tastes and strategies is leagues ahead of the party construction of most more high-brow RPG games. While some may argue that this 'kids' game' shouldn't even feature here, there's another Nintendo series that is even less sure whether it belongs or not.

AND SO WE come to a real bone of contention: the action-RPG, or more specifically *The Legend Of Zelda*. Is Nintendo's masterpiece series really an RPG at all? If we break it down, it becomes more apparent that Link's ongoing struggles reflect more traditional adventure games than they do RPGs. The fact that character progression is so heavily item based and that all attack damage and so on is predetermined means that if you are to call *Zelda* an RPG then by the same token, you should do the same for the likes of *Devil May Cry*, *God Of War* and even *Dynasty Warriors*. No, *Zelda* is very much an adventure series and if we're looking for titles that really fall into the action-RPG sub-genre, we need look no further than those


Star Wars Galaxies – a fanboy's dream.



The Iconic Character



Looking back at him now – with his spiky hair, odd proportions and much to be angry about – *Final Fantasy VII*'s lead could easily be seen as a stereotypical RPG character. But that wouldn't really be fair. In truth, Cloud Strife is more the very basis for this stereotype than just another cheap cookie-cutter job. As the star of the first genuinely brilliant RPG of the 32-bit era, it's no surprise that so many people would look to Cloud for inspiration – Tetsuya Nomura's most recognisable creation will live on in the RPG Hall of Fame (if such a place exists) and in the hearts of millions of fans.

***Final Fantasy VII* does an incredible job of making the player sympathise with Cloud, revealing bit by agonising bit the events prior to the game, that made him what he is. We're treated here to character development on an almost unparalleled level as Cloud slowly comes to terms with the truth about who he really is, and his rivalry with nemesis Sephiroth grows ever stronger. We genuinely care about Cloud's constant struggle and it's this that makes him such a strong character.**

Writer Kazushige Nojima has spoken of writing the script around Cloud's subdued nature in order to put the player in a position where they must determine what he may be thinking at any given time. Furthered by the dialogue options in the game, Cloud can pretty much be who you want him to be and again this is undoubtedly why he has so many fans compared to the silent or outspoken heroes of the RPG world.

Elder Scrolls 1-4 Disgaea 1+2 Breath Of Fire Golden Sun Dragon Quest Atelier Iris Baldur's Gate Trigger Chrono Cross Xenosaga Secret Of Mana Mother 1-3 Shining Force Knights Of The Old



"WE WILL REACH A POINT WHERE **EVERY GAME** HAS AN **ONLINE COMPONENT"**

CHRIS KRAMER, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS, SONY

CHRIS KRAMER

Senior director of corporate communications, Sony Online Entertainment

games™: With videogames such as *Champions Of Norrath* and *Untold Legends* remaining popular, are we seeing the return of the traditional action-RPG genre?

Chris Kramer: The traditional action-RPG genre has never gone away. There are a few titles in this genre that come out every year, and it remains a staple with both console and PC gamers. Look at the near-term line-up. You have SOE's *Dark Kingdom* in development for the PS3 launch, THQ's *Titan Quest* just came out (and is fun), *Justice League Heroes* from Warner Bros Interactive is coming for PS2, BioWare's *Mass Effect* (does that count? I think it does). And that's not even taking into account all the random little European PC titles in the works, like *The Witcher*.

g™: Given the success of MMO games like *EverQuest*, do you envisage almost every game being online in the future?

CK: Yes. Everything is connected these days, from your PC to your game console to your refrigerator. We will reach a point where every game has some sort of online component, whether it's a true MMO like *EverQuest*, a co-operative action-RPG like *Dark Kingdom* that allows four people to play through a game together or just a basic gateway to new content, like with *Oblivion*.

g™: Would you say that the more action-orientated angle of many of SOE's games makes them more accessible than your typical number-crunching RPG?

CK: A game like *Untold Legends* is much easier for people to pick up and start playing than a hardcore RPG. Even people who say they don't like RPGs can enjoy the *UL* games because they are more about whacking monsters and finding cool loot than they are about fine-tuning class systems and min/maxing yourself to sleep.

g™: What games would you cite among the most important in the history of the RPG genre?

CK: *Gauntlet*, *Dungeon Hack*, the original *Ultima*, *Final Fantasy III* on SNES, *Diablo*, *Baldur's Gate*, and *EverQuest*, of course.



that draw their influence from Midway's coin-op classic *Gauntlet*.

Combining the traditional dungeon-trawling gameplay and statistic-based action of so many older games with the action-centric combat of games like *Gauntlet*, this corner of the genre has spawned such gems as the *Diablo* and *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* games.

The appeal is simplicity, and while the amount of damage dished out, loot drops and so forth are always based on *D&D* (or similar) rule sets, a lot of the number crunching is done behind the scenes. This gives a real air of accessibility to games of this ilk, and many players that would never sit down and wade through pages of stats can happily slay hordes of enemies without giving a thought for the fact that they might be playing an RPG.

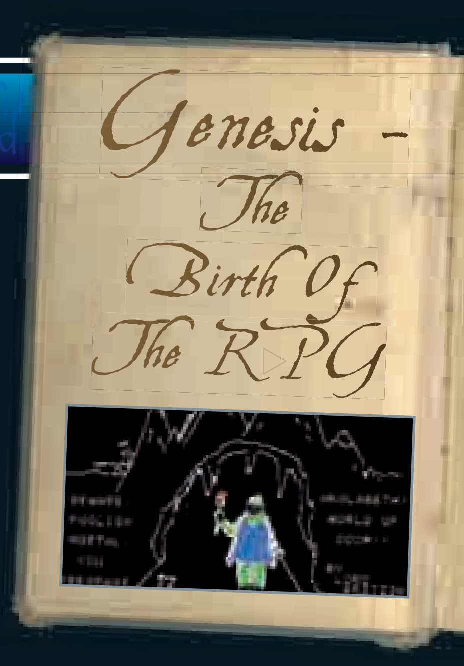
Similarly, the real-time strategy genre, made popular by games like *Command & Conquer*, has really started to embrace RPG elements of late. This large-scale strategic action has a massive audience in itself and by including elements of character progression and deeper storylines, the

Defining Moments

2. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

THE REVEAL

Anyone who has played Bethesda's stunning RPG will have their own favourite moments and humorous anecdotes, but one moment early on really sets the tone and gives us an idea what to expect from future RPGs. Starting out in a cell, your character escapes from captivity through a suitably drab array of tunnels, caves and sewers. Once you reach the end of the sewers and open the gate into the wide world, it's like a whole different game begins. Rivers, mountains and civilisation spread as far as the eye can see and, having been cooped up in corridors for the first hour, this new-found freedom is doubly exciting. Whichever direction you head after leaving the sewers, you'll find hundreds of quests to take on and ruins to explore – it's a virtual second life and you get to live it your way in this glorious world.



Akalabeth: World Of Doom

With several early RPGs leaving the starting blocks at the same time, it's *Akalabeth* that has the best story to tell. This Apple II game was basically a very simple computerised version of the *Dungeons & Dragons* rule-set by one Richard Garriott, the man that would go on to create the *Ultima* series. *Akalabeth* represented Garriott's twenty-eighth product but was the first to be sold commercially, earning him extra cash while in college.

crossover into our featured genre can open that demographic even wider. But if we move away from real-time gameplay, the marriage of RPG and strategy games becomes an even more apparent union. The name Nippon Ichi may not mean anything to you, but with its first title to be released outside of Japan, the small firm made a name for itself in RPG circles as it reinvented another popular sub-genre. Following the likes of *Final Fantasy Tactics*, *Disgaea* took the strategy RPG by storm, throwing in self-referential humour, limitless potential for progression and customisation, and an army of characters to recruit. With literally thousands of hours worth of gameplay for those willing to invest that kind of time, *Disgaea* took statistic-based action to a whole new level and often had attributes that rose way into numbers that some people didn't even know existed.

WHILE RARE, THE odd game is still unashamed to do things in an entirely retro manner. Square's *Unlimited SaGa* is, for all intents and purposes, a tabletop RPG for PS2. This unique approach to RPGs wasn't particularly well received as the massive amounts of menu-driven gameplay didn't make for an involving play experience – a lot of the gaming world just saw it as a massively alien concept, and to this day *Unlimited SaGa* remains one of the least user-friendly games to appear on PS2. Without the social interaction of the genuine tabletop game, Square's interesting idea resulted in a sterile and convoluted RPG, especially with so many games around it looking to make saving the world one number at a time as simple as possible. But while it was the sense of community of the traditional pen-and-paper RPG that was lost in translation for Square, this missing element was to become the cornerstone of a new area of the genre.

Now a staple of PC gaming, the Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Game is probably the most played genre on the home computer today, at least in terms of time played charted against registered users. Rather than focus on story or characters, these play heavily on themes of personalisation, freedom and community, granting the player the power to create his or her own unique avatar and slot into whatever role they may choose in a fictional universe. The vast worlds, social interaction and seemingly boundless freedom of these games is what makes them so compelling – despite the fact that the core action relies heavily on repetition in 'grinding' for items and experience, players have been known to stay in character for days on end as they become more and more drawn into their new life as an elf, a Wookiee or indeed whatever they damn well please. This dangerously addictive property has even come to light through several reports of players dying at their computers, having become more worried about the health and safety of their digital alter ego than their own existence.

Despite these tales of woe, it's arguably this section of the genre that has most potential to grow and reach out to new blood, as is exemplified perfectly by *Star Wars Galaxies*. It has been important for most other *Star Wars*-licensed games to carry some kind of narrative, often based on or derived from the films, but for a massive project like *Galaxies* it isn't about the story, it's about becoming part of the universe. Players can identify with the races, locations and even equipment in the game, making it more accessible and appealing to sci-fi fans. Cameos from key figures in the series make it even more believable, especially given the attention lavished on the game by its support team – one group of players who had set up their own Storm Trooper legion ▷

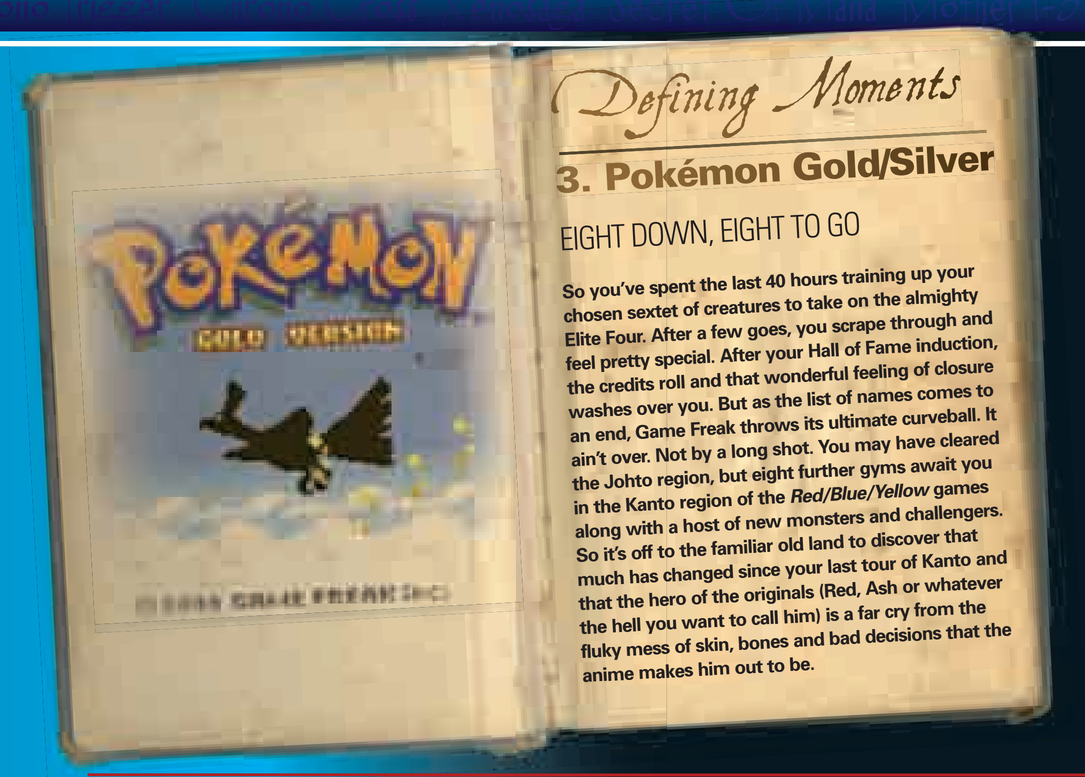
Turn On Tune In Level Up

The power of music in games is often overlooked, but within the RPG genre can be found some of the most moving, most memorable and most accomplished scores ever committed to CD, DVD or cartridge. From *Chrono Trigger* to *Skies Of Arcadia*, everyone will no doubt have a tune in their head that involuntarily slips out from time to time, but it's in *Final Fantasy* that we find some of the finest moments of sonic genius. Respected composer Nobuo Uematsu has penned some glorious pieces over the years, and though the strength and impact of the tunes as they are used in the games cannot be understated, their quality is confirmed through another slightly bizarre channel. Uematsu's group The Black Mages takes familiar tunes from the *FF* series and turns them up to 11, throwing in all kinds of rock guitars and solos where once there may only have been a basic Midi file. It might sound a little odd, but it works so well that it makes us want to cry.



Music is integral to the RPG experience.

Elder Scrolls 1-4 Disgaea 1+2 Breath Of Fire Golden Sun Dragon Quest Atelier Iris
Chrono Trigger Chrono Cross Xenosaga Secret Of Mana Mother 1+2 Shining Force Knights Of



Defining Moments

3. Pokémon Gold/Silver

EIGHT DOWN, EIGHT TO GO

So you've spent the last 40 hours training up your chosen sextet of creatures to take on the almighty Elite Four. After a few goes, you scrape through and feel pretty special. After your Hall of Fame induction, the credits roll and that wonderful feeling of closure washes over you. But as the list of names comes to an end, Game Freak throws its ultimate curveball. It ain't over. Not by a long shot. You may have cleared the Johto region, but eight further gyms await you in the Kanto region of the *Red/Blue/Yellow* games along with a host of new monsters and challengers. So it's off to the familiar old land to discover that much has changed since your last tour of Kanto and that the hero of the originals (Red, Ash or whatever the hell you want to call him) is a far cry from the fluky mess of skin, bones and bad decisions that the anime makes him out to be.

"OFTEN SEVERAL **SUB-GENRES CAN BE STRADDLED** OR DRAWN UPON TO CREATE **SOMETHING UNIQUE**"

even received a visit from Darth Vader to celebrate their efforts. While the allure of an all-new world in which to get lost is still strong for many, the ready-made familiarity of a licensed MMO is clearly a money-spinner that attracts fresh blood to the genre, and we expect this to grow. *Star Wars* and *D&D* have both done their bit and there are even *Pirates Of The Caribbean* and *Hello Kitty* MMOs on the way to shiver your proverbial timbers and desensitise you to the colour pink respectively.



Now back on Live Arcade.

OF COURSE, NOT every game falls into just one of these categories. Often, several of these sub-genres are straddled and/or drawn upon to create something unique. *The Elder Scrolls* games, and in particular *Oblivion*, feature much of the customisation and freedom associated with MMOs. But at the same time, the action-based combat opens the game up to non-RPG fans despite the fact that few games even come close to having so much statistical government going on in the background. This kind of accessibility will no doubt become more prevalent as development costs spiral out of control – being able to appeal to both hardcore RPG fans and other audiences simultaneously will prove invaluable to recouping development costs on big-budget games, especially for companies that may not have a familiar brand name. Even with those oh-so-important trademark names, the crossover is just as important. SquareEnix's *Final Fantasy XII* draws heavily from MMORPGs to create something refreshingly unfamiliar, which is even more unusual given that the *Final Fantasy* series is about as traditional as RPGs get.

Today, the influence of the RPG genre can be seen almost everywhere in gaming. The list of titles that have touched upon RPG elements or borrowed from the genre would stretch to the moon, and be it the levelling up of Frank West in *Dead Rising* or the need to keep *San Andreas'* CJ fed and in shape as his skills improve, the inclusion of such elements in so many varied releases really drives home the importance of the genre. Even the likes of *Need For Speed Underground* can be seen to draw upon the RPG for structure and progression, an odd concept but one in which there is obviously some degree of truth. It seems no genre is safe from the influence of the many elements that make up the RPG.

SO WHY DO people play RPGs? For the more forgetful among you, this question was answered in the very first word of this piece. Escapism. Whether you're following a wonderfully constructed narrative or just taking your own custom character around a fictional world, a good RPG can pull you into its world and keep you there for however many hundreds of hours it may last. There's the pacing issue too. Not everyone wants to have their eyes burned out by *Burnout's* blazing pace or *Devil May Cry's* explosive combat; some prefer the more sedate pace of a role-playing game. Even for those who do like their games a little crazy, there's nothing quite like a good RPG for the action comedown – a few *Disgaea* battles is enough to calm even the most worked-up gamer.

For existing fans and newcomers alike, 2006 represents one of the best years for RPGs in gaming history. *Final Fantasy XII, Kingdom Hearts II, Disgaea 2, Oblivion*… the list of games released so far or due out this year is shockingly good and offers very much something for everyone. The common preconceptions of the RPG genre now represent only a fraction of the truth. The goblins and elves so many blindly associate with the RPG now find themselves joined by characters from every imaginable place and walk of life – we've been to space, to real-world locations and even to hell itself. And as technology allows for more and more intricate characters and locales to be depicted, it's up to the writers to make sure that polished visuals aren't the only thing we notice about the next wave of role-playing games.



Games™ Bible Top 5

The five best time investments of your life

1 Skies Of Arcadia

Pirates are obviously amazing, but *Skies Of Arcadia* has much more to offer beyond such basic subject matter. A beautiful voyage of exploration and adventure, Sega's high-flying RPG is filled with stunning moments of inspiration, and even though the dangerously frequent random encounters may grate on many players, the core gameplay is nothing short of wonderful. You'll feel like the Columbus of the skies as you discover new lands aplenty, and with so much to do besides the main story quest, you could easily lose hours to this absolute masterpiece.

2 Final Fantasy VII

Being the game that made RPGs 'cool' is what earns *FFVII* a place here, but, ultimately, pretty much any *Final Fantasy* could be justified in occupying this slot. While some champion *FFX* or the much-loathed *VIII*, *FFVII* was our introduction to just what could be done within the confines of a traditional RPG – a compelling storyline, awesome characters, a superb battle system, wonderful music and a selection of great mini-games all combine to make *Final Fantasy VII* arguably the greatest RPG of all time.

3 Fallout 2

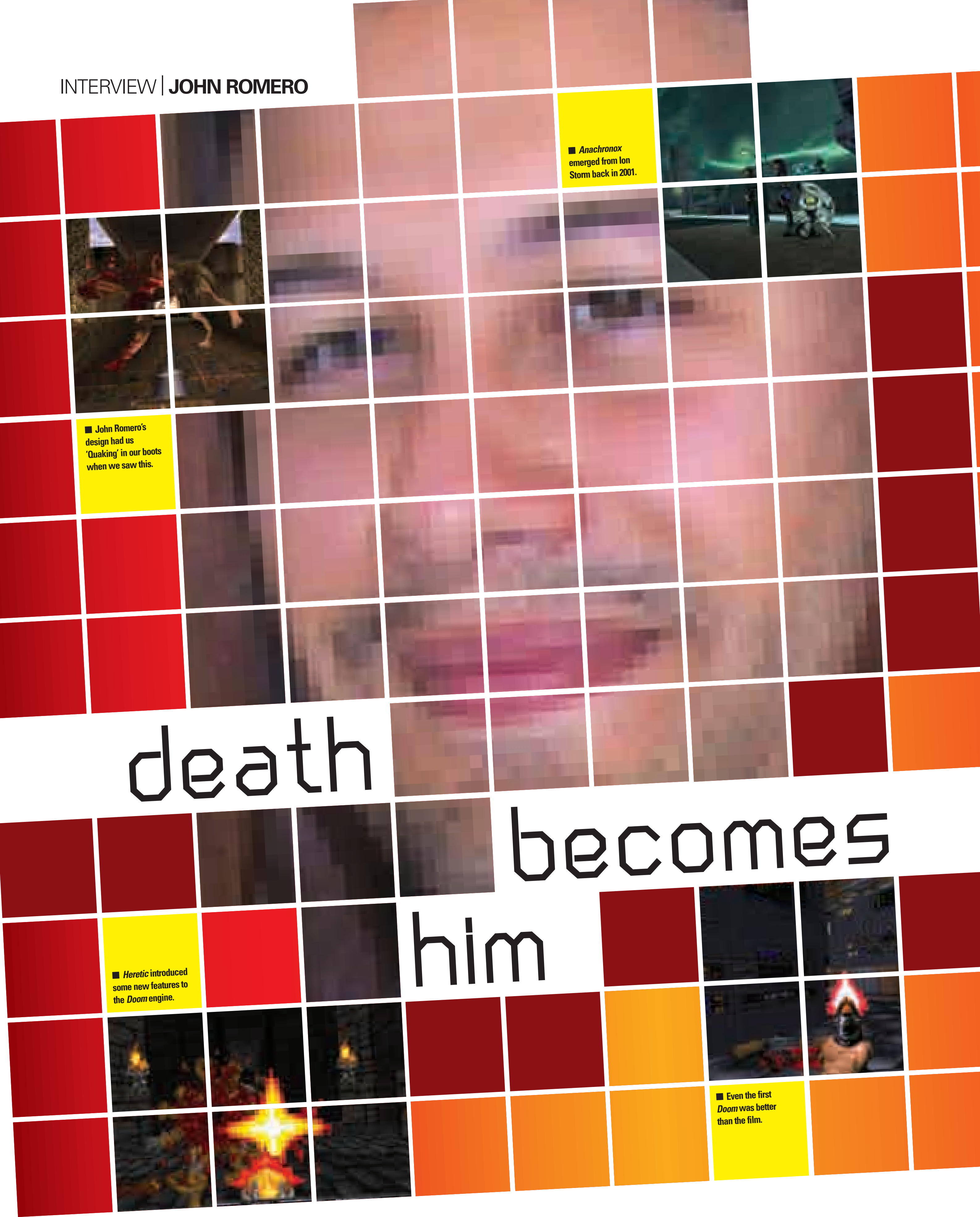
With so many RPGs walking the much-trodden fantasy path, Black Isle's post-apocalyptic sequel proved to be just the ticket for anyone wanting something more. A gritty setting was juxtaposed with a strangely dark sense of humour and excessive violence to create an experience not for the squeamish but one that has garnered quite the following since its 1998 release. While *Fallout 3* continues to appear on – and drop off – release schedules seemingly on a whim, we can't recommend better than this now-budget adventure to while away the hours.

4 World Of Warcraft

Representing the MMO contingent, Blizzard's reinvention of the *Warcraft* universe took the world by storm upon its release and still has millions of players hooked today. It's easy to see why: this accessible and involving online RPG nails everything that makes the genre what it is and has caused more late nights for the gaming public than any other game you care to mention. The promise of further expansions can only be good news, still, don't forget that you do actually need to sleep sometimes…

5 Chrono Trigger

The 16-bit era put forward so many great RPG experiences that picking one above others seems almost unfair. But since we have to, we've plumped for Square's time-travelling epic, a game that still seems far too big to be contained on a single SNES cartridge. A talking frog knight would usually be enough on its own for us, but, with a superb cast all round, 12 different endings to find and enough extra-curricular activity to keep you going for months, it's easy to see why so many people think of this as Square's finest product to date.



■ *Anachronox* emerged from Ion Storm back in 2001.

■ John Romero's design had us 'Quaking' in our boots when we saw this.

death becomes him

■ *Heretic* introduced some new features to the *Doom* engine.

■ Even the first *Doom* was better than the film.



■ *Hexen* was an improvement that added moving/sliding doors and walls as well as level scripting.

With a career that has spanned decades, containing as many flops as hits, Romero will be immortalised for his role in crafting the FPS genre we all take for granted today. games™ caught up with the videogame legend to talk about the good, the bad and the Daikatana

■ Wolfenstein is also a German rock formation that looks like a pile of bags… apparently.

It's easy to pick on John Romero. Although in his 25-year career he has managed to make a splash practically everywhere in gaming, it has often been for the wrong reasons. From wunderkind virtuoso programmer to the godfather of first-person shooters to the *Daikatana* kerfuffle to mobile gaming to *Gauntlet* to his position as an MMO designer today, the man Ion Storm PR announced would make the world his "bitch" has a lot to explain.

The question, then, is which bits are kosher? For one, Romero insists his reputation as a 'courter of fame' is unfair. On www.rome.ro, his website and blog, he writes, "I court celebrity just about as much as anyone else doing their job in this world. When a magazine wants to know what I'm doing, I tell them. It gets printed. There you go, that's the whole crazy, power-hungry trip I'm on – I talk to journalists so they can write and make a living".

Still, even if he did like getting his name spread about, it's not as if he doesn't have the cred. Some gamers probably don't even know how far Romero's influence stretches. Familiar with the term 'deathmatch'? Yep, that was him. He's also the co-founder of Id Software, one of the most successful and well-known development studios in the industry. *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Doom*, and *Quake*? All made under Romero's design. Sadly, the biggest blemish on his record also happens to be the one that gets the most airplay: the creation of development studio Ion Storm, and *Daikatana*, the ill-fated FPS. Remarkably, he's candid about the whole affair. "Pretty much every mistake you can make," he laughs, "I made it."

He's lost count of the disasters spawned during his tenure at Ion Storm, and doubts anyone could ever know the full extent of the chaos within the company. And the cause? "Changing *Daikatana*'s engine was definitely a huge problem. Hiring a ton of people who'd never worked on a game before? Huge mistake. Growing a company that fast was also a mistake – we had 120 people. I can't believe the games actually came out. We did the crazy press barrage that the marketing guy came up with, and *Daikatana*, from concept to ship took about three years and two months. And during that time, we were growing like crazy, people were leaving the studio, we were hiring new people, we moved office… It was just insane. That said, if I think about the whole Ion Storm thing, I

don't think of it negatively; I'm kind of neutral."

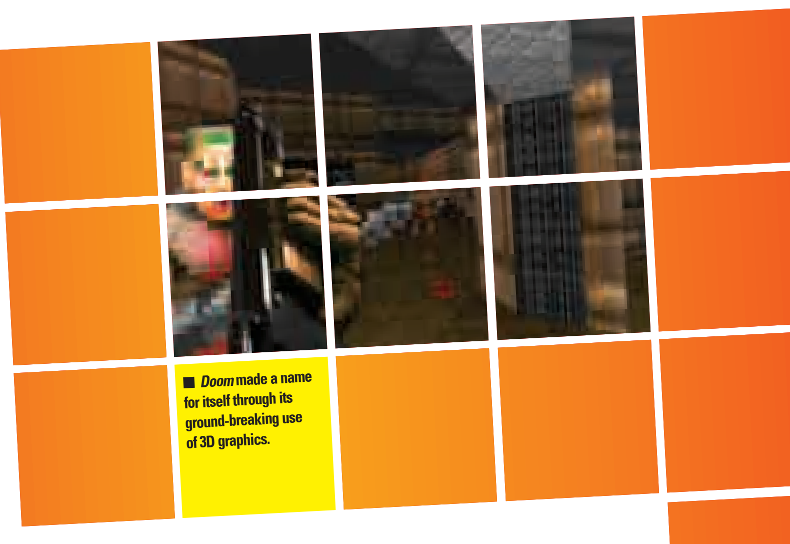
Neutrality aside, Romero claims he's learned a lot from those days. "Too much," he chortles. "You know, starting the company, who you start with, hiring practices – who you hire – having an actual production process, hiring producers, having a proper hierarchy, having strong leads, having design docs, having all your documentation online in a Wiki format rather than in .doc files hidden away on someone's computer. A lot of things."

AFTER ION STORM Dallas' collapse, Romero put those lessons to good use when he formed the mobile-gaming-focused Monkeystone with old pal Tom Hall and then-girlfriend Stevie Case – the woman to whom Romero erected a shrine in honour of her much-publicised victory over him in a *Quake* deathmatch. And he was happy at Monkeystone because he finally got to do what he did best: design. "In terms of the whole Ion Storm thing, we never actually got to make stuff. Mostly, we were directing. So at Monkeystone we got to do it. I was programming all the time, and Tom was doing the level design and game design. It was great."

Although Monkeystone is now kaput, Romero is still enthusiastic about mobile gaming. "It's definitely like in the Apple II time period," he gushes, "when it was just like everyone was making games, and it wasn't too difficult. It's definitely easier than an Xbox or a PS2 or a real PC title. And the only difficulty you have on a cellphone is the actual hardware. It's tough to deal with […] but if you're used to console development it's not that bad. There's a lot of talk in the mobile gaming world about 3D processors coming into the phones. A lot of people think it would be stupid to make 3D games on mobile phones because they're really only good for simple 2D titles. You know, it's just like, 'Let me play some *Bejeweled*, or some poker, or something. I've got to get on a plane.' But we're going to see new stuff – I did *Red Faction* on the N-Gage, and that's a full-3D game. And it wasn't a very good game, but it was 3D on a cellphone!"

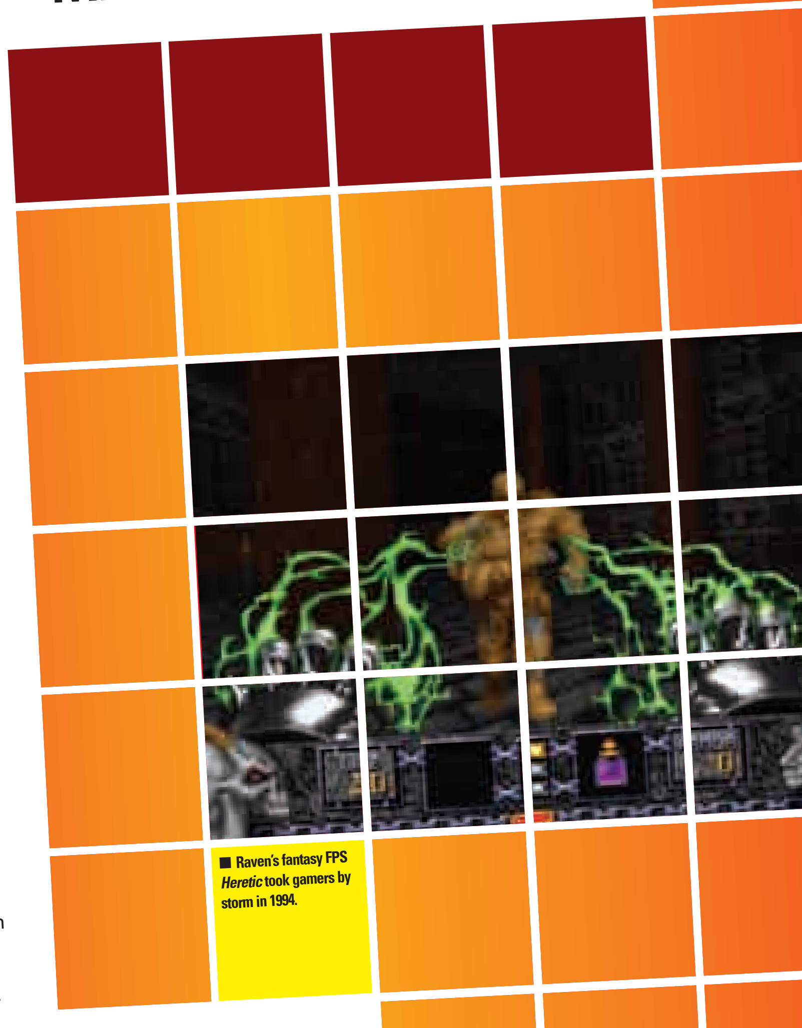
Romero seems to have softened his views on technology's role in game design. After all, he was fired from Id for disagreeing with the company's focus on tech over design, and went on to form Ion Storm whose mission statement was 'Design Is Law'. These days he says: "I don't know if I'd say [that games are too technology driven]. There's a ton of technology that keeps pushing forward and is making games look better, but there is also a lot of copycat design. But then, there's also a lot of innovative design. And that spawns more copies. I don't think the technology is hindering design. Especially nowadays, when you can licence a game engine, which removes your focus from the tech side, and aims it more towards design. I think engine licensing has really helped the game industry focus more on design. So I think tech is actually helping out. Advancing technology gives you ideas for new gameplay, which is cool. Especially in a hardware sense: *Guitar Hero*, Nintendo DS, the Wii… Sometimes, just putting your foot out there and doing something new can result in a ton of new gameplay ideas and innovation."

Romero's love of innovation is the main reason why his career has spanned so many different gameplay styles and genres. What's more, all of his best game-design memories concern the shock of the new. "Every part of my game design career has had a different purpose," he recalls. "I loved the beginning – the first ten or



■ *Doom* made a name for itself through its ground-breaking use of 3D graphics.

"DOOM 3 WAS THE MOST PREDICTABLE GAME I EVER PLAYED. I WAS JUST **BORED… MEH. NOT INTERESTED"**



■ Raven's fantasy FPS *Heretic* took gamers by storm in 1994.



■ The soundtrack to *Quake* was created by Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails – he's admitted to being a 'Doom addict'.

■ 'Hexen' is the German word for 'witches'.

AHEAD...

Romero's moved on to different, more massively multi-player horizons, but he does have an idea of where he'd like the FPS genre to go. "Where can you go that's different to right now?" he ponders. "They're all about destroying your enemies, so how much better can you destroy the enemy? There's a lot of other ways that no one's tried because everyone thinks the FPS is about holding a weapon. But [in] how many FPSs do you just get physical, on top of them, and just pummelling them, or something? You're always removed from the destruction. You press a button on a weapon rather than manipulating your fist in somebody's face. Maybe that needs to be looked at more deeply. If I were going to do another FPS, it'd be something I'd focus on. It'd involve stealth action, too."

so years – before co-founding Id Software. Founding Id was really fun, too. I had a ton of fun learning assembly language, publishing tons of games, learning and learning and learning, trying to do better and better. I remember after coding for the Apple II for so long and then the Apple market dying, I was like, 'Oh my god, I have to start over again. I have to go to the PC and start over. Holy crap. I can't believe it's been ten years. I didn't go anywhere.' But I jumped on the PC, got hooked up with John [Carmack], Adrian [Carmack] and Tom [Hall], and we all flipped and started Id, and that was the next chapter. That was the first time something that really made me know things were going to seriously change. It wasn't like, 'Hey, this is kind of a good opportunity. Yeah, let's just start a company.' It was like, 'No, we have to. This is too big.'"

HIS GAMBLE PAID off. Id Software not only stamped numerous successful titles, but it also ended up being an icon of gaming's newly mainstream status. Romero well remembers the early days of Id: "In 1991 we made a ton of games", he recalls, "then we got onto *Wolfenstein*, *Doom*, *Doom II*, *Heretic*, *Hexen*, *Quake*… that was really fun. The feeling of the Id days was great because Carmack was such an awesome programmer. I didn't have to worry about the implementation of stuff I couldn't program, because he could. He could code anything. Give him crazy stuff and he'll do it. So the feeling of invincibility was there for a long time."

It's been ten years since Romero left Id, and he can't say he feels the invincibility's still there. In reference to the firm's recent *Doom 3*, he states: "I'm really not into games that are just dark. Pitch black. I don't think the sharp shadows look good. I'm not turned on by them or by having a game that's just pure darkness. [Valve's] Source engine was great – I loved being outside, being able to see colour and light and daylight, and not just a black tomb. For me the days of black tombs are over. Game-design-wise, well, you know, I think Id really should move forward with its game design. *Doom 3* was the most predictable game I ever played. I couldn't finish it; I only played it for about eight hours, and I was just bored. Oh, hallways with monsters predictably popping out… Meh. Not interested.

When they come out with a new IP, I'll probably be interested. I played *Quake IV* and it looked just like *Doom 3*. I think they've done a really bad job managing their IP. It's so hard to tell the difference between *Doom* and *Quake* now. It's all the same kind of stuff. Mechanical monsters, space marines. Okay, how did those two get blurred together? I would've kept the two lines separate. *Wolfenstein*'s very different from *Doom* and *Quake*. *Doom* and *Quake* are sort of mish-mashed together now. And I think Raven was told what to do with *Quake IV*, and they did what Id wanted them to do. It was a nice continuation from *Quake II*; it was a good continuation of the story, but it's so similar to *Doom*. The original *Quake* was its own thing. It could've gone in a different direction. It's just bad brand handling. They don't have a visionary creative director there. As I say, when they come out with a new IP, I'll be interested."

You might wonder in what direction Romero had hoped *Quake* would go. He's not sure how to explain it, but he does his best. "It was a completely different game design that might not have been first-

person. The original idea was that it'd be first-person, and then it'd go into a third-person fighting thing. There's no real way to put it. I know what I wanted the world to feel like. If we'd gone down that development path, we'd have ended up in a completely different place. It was not going to be a shooter; it was more a very dark… well, you kind of get the feeling that it's a dark game. It's unsettling, very violent, great gibs – it's kind of raw. I wanted that, but not in a shooter motif. I wanted it to be more physical and more personal. And we wanted to have cool stuff, like if you're rolling down a mountain, we wanted the camera to move on that axis. Even *Doom*, when we started on it, had nothing to do with how it ended up. We just had this technology and we were seeing what we could do with it. We didn't have enough exploration."

Some have blamed Id's 'sequelitis' on a gaming industry that relies too heavily on 'safe' products. But Romero is reluctant to speak out against his field. For one, he thinks that the industry is a lot easier to get into than in the past. "A lot of people don't understand that. They say, 'Oh, I don't know how to do this,' or, 'I can't seem to get an interview.' And I'm like, 'You know what? Back in the Eighties, you had to be an assembly language programmer who had to be able to make an entire game by yourself.' And to do that required an insane number of hours – it was highly technical work and you had to do everything. Nowadays, people are applying for specialisation jobs. It's like, 'I'm going to make meshes,' or, 'I'm going to do textures,' or, 'I'm going to do animations.' You can really focus on one area. To just get in the door these days, you don't really have to spend too much time getting proficient. I think it's great that people can get in here so easily.

Then there are a lot of other good things about the games industry – genres developing, people pushing technology, and design. People can bitch and moan as much as they want about little things, but overall I think it's going great. If it were stagnant, jobs would be hard to find, there'd be no innovation, hardware would probably freeze at some point. It's a great industry that's always changing. You're not out there carving up metal for candlesticks. It's not like the plumbing industry, which has been the same for 50 years."

THAT SAID, HE admits he's a little wistful about the industry's early days. Specifically, he yearns for the days when every new game seemed completely different to the last. "When 1980 came around and *Pac-Man* came out, I was just blown away," he enthuses. "I could not believe how different the game design was from the 'shoot the aliens' formula, which was dominant throughout the arcade industry. And that just opened my eyes to the fact that game design could be whatever you wanted it to be. In the following years after 1980, people were just coming up with the craziest ideas. And not just that, but the Commodore 64, the Atari 800, the Apple II – they all had these crazy games on them, and you basically came up with ideas and wrapped a game around it, and came up with a weird new play mechanic. It was that Wild West, new-frontier kind of feeling that was awesome. And the Japanese are still coming up with that stuff; the US, not so much."

DURING HIS TIME at Midway, Romero had hoped to inject some of his own innovation into US gaming with 2005's *Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows*,



■ *Doom's* violence and graphics stirred up a fair bit of controversy.

■ In the Die, Führer, Die level of *Wolfenstein*, you take on Hitler equipped with a robotic suit.

"PEOPLE CAN BITCH AS MUCH AS THEY WANT ABOUT LITTLE THINGS, BUT OVERALL [THE INDUSTRY'S] GREAT"



■ At the time, *Heretic* was Raven's most successful game.

but he was fired before the game's completion, and the resulting piece of software was decidedly average at best. He sighs, "Basically, Midway had a fourth-quarter 2005 where they had to ship games, and they had three slated. Two of those dropped out; they were absolutely not ready to ship. *Gauntlet* was the only one left, but we needed about three more months to make the game we'd actually designed. We told the corporate office, 'Sorry about the news about those two games, but we're also going to split because we're trying to do something great here, and it's taking a little extra time.' And they basically said, 'No way. This game will ship, no matter what', and that meant cutting it up into pieces. They knew I wouldn't be happy with it, and the studio head wouldn't be happy with it. The only way to do a massive change like that on a game was to get rid of us, and use people they already had in the studio because they were planning to close the place down after development, anyway. It was like, 'We already have people in-house to finish the game, because those guys would probably just be trouble if they were still on staff and they saw this massive shake-up.' So, they let us go without any reason, but we kind of knew what it was. Plus, by getting rid of us, they'd save heaps of money."

The company proceeded to chop the game down to a third of the levels Romero had made for it. "They got rid of all the cinematics we'd spent tons of money on, and the story got completely redone. It's not as bad as what happened with *Quake*, but it's close."

Throughout his career, Romero's views on design often didn't mesh with the bottom line, and his ambition earned him vociferous critics along the way – not least John Carmack who has let loose with the vitriol on several occasions. Among other things, the gaming industry's star programmer has suggested Ion Storm's demise was the result of a "lack of focus, which came from the top," and that "Romero's primary mistake was believing that abstract creative design was a primary, or even significant part of a successful game. The 'strategic creativity' in a game is less than one per cent of the effort, and if you put that on a pedestal, you will de-emphasise where all the real work needs to be done." In his defence, Carmack was replying to a Salon article that basically suggested he only cared about new technology. He's also argued that "[Romero] wants an empire; I just want to create good programs".

So does Romero want an empire? Does he still want what he tried to achieve with Ion Storm? It's hard to say. His design tastes have shifted to the massively multi-player genre, where he plans to make an MMO unlike anything else on the market. And although MMO is arguably the most successful genre in gaming at the moment, Romero is making an uncharacteristic move with his new game's development. Namely? It's not getting hyped. He won't say a word about it. Interestingly, though, MMO is probably the best genre for his grandiose sensibilities – he likes to make games big, and that's exactly what MMOs are. If his game takes off, Romero's detractors may end up plucking a different ukulele. But hang on a minute – MMOs? Has the father of "Suck It Down!" gone soft? "I don't play as much as I used to," he admits, "but get me in a deathmatch again, and I'll be back."

What about his token smack-talk? "Totally. I'm not, like, 80 years old or anything. It's gonna happen."



FAILURE TO LAUNCH

Innovation is key to the long-term health of the game industry, but how can we continue to grow when we can't even agree on what the term means, let alone convince publishers to support the weird and the new, or get players to actually buy them? Despite various efforts, the industry just refuses to give originality a fair chance. games™ investigates…



So here we are again. Another hardware transition, another temporary dip in sales and another chance for the skittish fringes of the videogame industry to freak out about the future of the medium. Where are all the original games? What happened to innovation? Former Atari designer and industry critic Chris Crawford has even gone as far as to claim that the creative life has gone out of the industry and that games haven't seen any innovation in at least a decade.

It's a ridiculous statement and one that bears the fingerprints of a personal agenda, but it's also a difficult argument to dismiss at face value when the word itself is so abused. What exactly should innovation mean? Just how innovative is the current gaming landscape? And, most importantly, if amid the supposed morass of genre franchises and licences there is a grain of innovation, where is it taking the medium? Are games on track to finding a strong, unique voice capable of reaching a true mass market of all ages, sexes and backgrounds, or is the industry destined for a slow decline into niche status as the same type of games are churned out each year for an ever-diminishing audience?

"I think we have a tendency to call it innovation when it's a successful experiment, and random change if it fails," suggests Will Wright, chief designer at Maxis and creator of the phenomenal *The Sims* and the highly anticipated *Spore*. "There's plenty of innovation in games today, but it's buried in a sea of noise – if 95 per cent of what you see is a retread of existing games then the five per cent of innovation looks small, but if you could separate that piece out you'd realise there was a great deal of new stuff out there."

In the last two decades, videogames have made the transitions from single-screen, monochrome, single-button games primarily in arcades to a much more varied mix of content stretching from virtual doll houses to war simulations to sports. In a much wider context, that includes arcades, the home, professional gaming leagues and online communities while reaching an ever-ageing and broadening audience. Has gaming's potential been realised? Absolutely not, but the progress is both clear and startling when you look at it in context, and to say that the entire industry has not been moving forward is a simple-minded generalisation.

Part of the problem appears to be the general tendency to dismiss any sequel or licence at face value as being incapable of innovation, but any title is capable of driving the game industry forward. "I think innovation can happen at any level, including marketing and production," offers Wright. "Think of it like evolution: sometimes you get a slight innovation (extra toes), other times these things add up to entirely new dimensions (the ability to fly)."

It's a sentiment matched by Bing Gordon, chief creative officer at Electronic Arts. "There seems to be a belief among players that innovation equals new intellectual property, but that's not necessarily true. Innovation on a feature level is equally important. In fact, the games that I've found most innovative in the last few years are games like *World Of Warcraft* which are incredibly well polished and manage to find a much wider audience. People today don't consider sport sequels innovative, but the first year I pitched an annual sequel to *Madden* I was told by marketing, retail and sales that it could not be done," continues Gordon. "The consensus was that sports sequels didn't sell. And they said the same thing about expansion packs for *The Sims*."



This highlights the uncomfortably short memories of most gamers and game journalists. Both *Madden* and *The Sims* are criticised for their regular sequels and expansion packs, but both continue to innovate for one simple reason: they found audiences that were previously disinterested or unexposed to games. *The Sims* proved that women will play games just as passionately as men if they have a game they actually care about, while *Madden* not only emulated the National Football League, it also mimicked the way it is consumed by fans, creating yearly cycles that kept the roster and launch date in synch with the real-world sport.

THE PAST

The last 30 years has seen an explosion of game content crossing multiple genres and systems, but certain games stand out as starting new trends in design and breaking new ground…

"The most innovative games of all time? *Defender*, *Crossword Puzzles* and *Paper Rock Scissors*."
Will Wright, chief designer, Maxis

"My instinctual reaction is to say Brian Moriarty's game, *Loom*. It's easy to look at *Loom* now and say, 'big whoop, it's a graphic adventure game'. But that game made a lot of very strong, very deliberate design decisions including the following: we are never going to kill the player or get him into an irreversible situation; the game is going to be artistic in presentation and style; it will have a very simple interface, with just one kind of puzzle (what music to play). To the greatest extent possible, the game will be about human relationships and crises (not about manipulating objects to solve puzzles and collect things, like most adventure games were). It will have a rich world and – to the best extent possible given your limited interaction – strong and interesting characters."
Jonathan Blow, GDC Experimental Gameplay Workshop Founder

"*Super Mario Bros* for being the first mascot game. *Pinball Construction Set* for being the first game to deliver customisation. *Seven Cities Of Gold* for being the first great random-world generator game (starting with tectonic plates). *M.U.L.E.* for being the first great four-player game. *Freecell* for being the first great casual game. *Populous* for being the first God game. *Sim City* for being the first simulation toy. *Doom* for being the game that made Internet gaming into a sport. *The Sims* for being the first user-generated content metagame. *Pokémon* for being the first crossover media game and the first battle card game. Finally, *Grand Theft Auto* for being the first successful living world adventure."
Bing Gordon, creative officer, Electronic Arts

"YOU CAN THINK OF **INNOVATION** AS BEING LIKE **ROCKET FUEL.** RIGHT NOW WE NEED THAT **FUEL** TO GET THAT **ROCKET** TO A **GOOD PLACE**"

Most fascinatingly of all, both franchises have a large percentage of players who don't play many other games.

It's an interesting spin on innovation; it doesn't matter whether a game is attached to a licence or if it's the fifteenth iteration of a franchise, what matters is whether the game succeeds in growing the audience and broadening the appeal of games. Seen from this angle, although games have not reached the scale of either movies or books – ignore the massaging of statistics by groups such as the Entertainment Software Association and the erroneous headlines about games outselling Hollywood – the industry has expanded incredibly quickly. As gamers have aged they have continued to play games, pushing the average player age into the twenties and broadening the type of games being developed. It's a trend which has seen the central focus shift from the almost exclusive focus on children's products in the Eighties to include the adolescent power fantasies of the Nineties and hopefully toward a gaming future that includes titles aimed exclusively at adults.

RISK VS REWARD

Such a future would be pure nirvana for gamers, publishers and developers alike – a mature industry in which any type of game has the potential to find an audience – but it's by no means guaranteed. Such a change will come through gradual shifts in design and technology, a fact that makes it difficult for casual or shallow industry observers to notice, but which are key to maintaining an audience as the industry continues to grow.

"Right now, innovation is extremely valuable," says Jonathan Blow, founder of the Experimental Gameplay Workshop at the Game Developers Conference and Independent Games Festival award winner. "The innovation gives players a new experience – a 'wow' factor – which is enough to keep us occupied for the moment. But without that wow factor, the games wouldn't be very interesting. This is bad news if you consider games an art form – it means the form is shallow and not really capable of speaking to people in a way that matters, so we need glitzy new stuff to trick people into playing. But rather than using innovation as a distraction, we could use it with the clear intention of evolving the medium so that it becomes capable of speaking to people. Once that happens, glitzy innovation won't be so necessary."

Funding innovation has always been a risky business, especially with the rising costs of development at the high end of the industry. "Let's say you have a new idea. Let's say that from a publisher's perspective it has a 50 per cent chance of success. Ten years ago it might have cost $100,000 to test that idea, but now it costs maybe $10 million. If you had to lay out $10 million every time you wanted to find out if a game idea was good or bad, you'd be very, very careful in what you chose to explore," says Seppo Helava, a designer at Backbone Entertainment. For publishers, that means sticking to what they supposedly know and what supposedly sells. That translates into fewer 'risky' games and fewer untested ideas."



While it may be fashionable to pin the blame on publishers, the truth is that players are equally responsible. Recent titles like *Psychonauts*, *Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath*, and *Beyond Good & Evil* were all lauded as great games and then promptly ignored by the buying public. If players are not willing to invest £50 in a game that's been receiving fantastic reviews, then how can they expect publishers to spend several million pounds developing new ideas when even success often breeds apathy in the marketplace?

"Players say they want original games, but you can't trust what they say they want, you need to watch what they buy," says Gordon. "Players would love publishers to take a risk on a hundred new intellectual properties then cherry pick the one title that succeeded in being innovative and fun, but they don't care about the money lost on the other 99 games. Brand extension has less upside in terms of sales than a new intellectual property, but it also generally has less downside, which is why it's attractive to business people."

Chris Wren, senior producer at Namco Bandai Games takes it one step further. "I don't entirely believe that users all want more original games. I find that many gamers like more of the same and they'll just as soon burn you at the stake if you mess with their favourite game mechanic as they will for totally lacking innovation, a fine line to be walked for all developers," he states.

"People have a hard time thinking outside what is familiar to them – even in a small-scale setting like franchise/brand names," says Blow. "Gameplay is subtle and invisible, so if you want to sell copies, you have to teach people why they want the new gameplay that you have to offer… and that is generally a great way to go bankrupt. With existing games, players have a reason to buy the game because they've already had a good experience

THE ACCIDENTS

Not every game needs to break new ground, but some really scrape the bottom of the barrel. So what are, or were the worst examples of backward-thinking game design?

"The worst examples I can think of usually take either a good IP, or a new technology and base their entire plan on one of the two with no thought put into game design. How many superhero games or *Star Wars* games did it take before we started seeing some respect paid to these licences. New technology can also be the bane of good game design: I remember the MMX instruction set from Intel somehow managed to become the main selling point of a few games. And don't get me started on the FMV crap we saw in the mid-Nineties. Pretty much anyone with a handy cam and HTML background was churning out what they qualified as a game." **Chris Wren, senior producer, Namco Bandai Games**

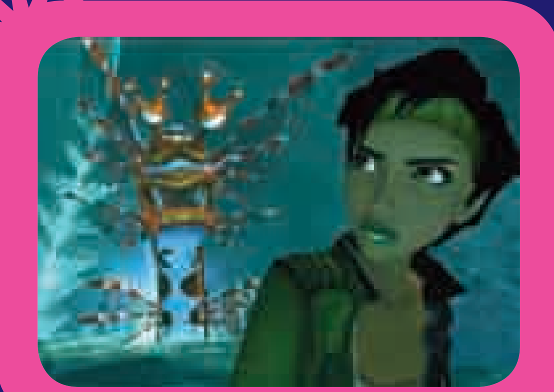
"At every E3, it seems like there is one category that is crowded with me-too titles. This year it was MMORPG games. There were a couple of titles that were pushing the category forward – like *Warhammer* – but I was disappointed with most of the MMORPG titles I saw."
Patrick Buechner, vice president of marketing, Maxis and Criterion

"*Jak 2* from Naughty Dog. Without question, the most cynical, focus-testing-driven cash-in I have ever seen. It felt as though it had been created by reading down a list of marketing bullet points, and not by anything anyone actually cared about."
Seppo Helava, designer, Backbone Entertainment

with that kind of gameplay or at least got some boredom alleviation, whereas a new game is weird and mysterious. Playing a new game that you know nothing about is risky, and people are risk-averse, just like companies."

This all leads to another obstacle: large retail chains. These mega-corporations control the shelf space allotted to each title and publisher, and, through that, control the public's ability to buy or even become aware of new or niche games. "The simple fact is that the corporate videogame buyer at Wal-Mart has more say than anyone in the gaming industry," reveals Helava. "If Wal-Mart can sell copies, they'll buy them. If Wal-Mart won't sell it, the publisher won't fund it. Wal-Mart, of course, isn't the most forward-thinking entity in all of gaming, and as a result a lot of original games simply never get shelf space there, so they flounder at niche gaming specialty shops where they'll never get enough exposure to make back their development costs."

A particularly good case study is 2005's *Psychonauts* which fought all of these battles in succession and did not succeed at retail despite rave reviews. A deal was signed with Microsoft, but the publisher's loss of faith saw the title dumped from the portfolio. The developer, Double Fine, managed to keep itself afloat to finish the game, and eventually signed with budget-focused Majesco in the US. The game was meant to be a step into the mainstream for Majesco, and a big hit for Double Fine, but several creative and business obstacles killed it in its tracks. Despite being a great game, *Psychonauts* did not make a clear statement about its gameplay that would differentiate it from other superficially similar games, and its publisher was too small to get large chains to carry it in sufficient numbers.



However, the industry cannot afford to let these obstacles get in the way, a fact recognised even within the marketing community and traditionally seen as an obstacle to creativity. "Developing original games and innovating is risky," says Patrick Buechner, vice president of marketing for Maxis and Criterion, "but given the expectations of players and the desire and opportunity to bring new people to gaming, NOT innovating is a bigger risk. The average consumer has too many other entertainment options. Ten years ago, gaming competed with cable TV, movie theatres and CDs. Today it competes with media on demand through broadband, social networks like MySpace, TiVo, iPod and iTunes, home theatres, blogs, mobile phones, YouTube and more. More than ever, gaming is a guest in the attention span of the consumer. Innovation is a necessity."

WHAT'S AHEAD?

"Fortunately the risk-aversity of big publishers does not matter as much now because anyone can sell games over the Internet," explains Blow. "Sure, you get less marketing and exposure, but so what – if you feel the game you are making is fundamentally important, those are smaller concerns. It is small developers' role to push originality – individual people, and small teams of, like, three or four. As I've said, pushing forward involves a lot of short-term sacrifice – making a lot of games that aren't fun, that don't sell, that get panned in reviews and so on. Someone's got to step on those landmines, and it will in general only be individuals with small amounts of money at risk, and strong ideals to drive them."

This online sales drive is seen on PC, with Valve's Steam beginning to flesh out its line-up with fascinating games like *Rag Doll Kung-Fu*, *Darwinia* and *The Ship*, and also on consoles with Microsoft continuing to prove that the major selling point for its hardware is its elegant Xbox Live implementation and promotion of downloadable games such as *Geometry Wars*. All of these games would be considered either strange or too small to be stocked by retail, but all have found an appropriate audience through digital content distribution.

Online distribution goes some way to helping to keep videogames in stock long enough that they will hopefully have the time to find an audience through word of mouth rather than being forced to succeed or fail in the few brief weeks following publication. With any luck, this will prevent the large retail chains from having such a serious/damaging impact on the industry, as more games will essentially be available at any time. Even if you hear about a new or interesting game a year after it was released, the digital shelf space will always carry a copy of the game for you to purchase and play.

Equally exciting is the resurgence in hardware innovation, especially when looking at controller design and Nintendo's new 'disruptive' design philosophy. The basic pattern in console hardware since Atari 2600 has been to create more

THE FUTURE

It's often hard to see innovation anywhere but in the rear-view mirror, but the following three games stand out as having the potential to redefine three very different genres…

SPORE

Will Wright and his team at Maxis are attempting to create the ultimate simulation allowing players to control everything from the origins of life as a single-cell organism, right through to that cell's eventual fate as a space-faring creature. Equally exciting is the attempt to create virtually infinite content for the title by populating each game with creatures, buildings, vehicles and planets created by other players. If it can find a compelling game to match its epic scope and ingenious approach to content, then this game will be huge.

TABULA RASA

RPG legend Richard Garriott helped create the modern MMO when he produced *Ultima Online*. Now, he's returning to the genre and attempting to add the last major RPG element that other MMOs have yet to integrate successfully: a compelling story. No longer content to force players to fulfill tedious fetch-and-destroy quests, *Tabula Rasa* aims to provide a story and mission structure as deep and fulfilling as any single-player game. If it succeeds, it may mean the concept of an offline RPG becomes redundant overnight.

ASSASSIN'S CREED

From the team that created the original *Prince Of Persia: Sands Of Time*, *Assassin's Creed* is aiming to be the first truly great action-adventure title of the new hardware generation. Forsaking the linear levels of other similar games, the world itself is a playground that allows the player to scale any wall, explore any rooftop, and find multiple avenues to drop into the action. Similarly, the other characters in the world are no longer lobotomised cannon fodder for the player, but are instead capable of mimicking the gamer's every move. And perhaps most excitingly, the game's interpretation of the Third Crusade seems to be an intelligent and mature one. If the early promise is fulfilled it will pave the way for all future action-adventure titles.



complex controllers with more buttons and more features that can allow more depth and level of control in games, but also drastically increase the learning curve for new players and make it difficult for non-gamers to pick up a game and play it.

The touch screen on Nintendo DS, and the 'wand' controller on the soon-to-be-released Nintendo Wii are much simpler devices with straightforward real-world counterparts. Anyone who knows how to use a pen can use the DS, and anyone who can point should (hopefully) be able to use the Wii.

Developers are also offered new ways to design interactive experiences, and hopefully find new players as Wren identifies: "Surely the Nintendo Wii has sparked some creativity with its 'wand'. Many developers are now thinking about how to best use this input device to make a game rather than trying to make a game fit and function on a standard controller. This upside-down perspective I think is a good source of innovation."

Here we have a great opportunity for developers and the industry in general, but it's just the first step. "Technology unlocks the possibility of innovation, but it does not make you creative," says Wright. "Ideas are the things that fill the new spaces and create paradigm shifts. We're still unlocking new markets in gaming – people are getting older and still playing games, and hopefully they will be able to continue to pick up new and different games and be surprised by the amount of enjoyment they get."

We should all think about these words of wisdom next time we're buying games or hardware. Videogames have taken great leaps in recent years, and the new generation of hardware is providing a rare opportunity for games to become an even larger and more relevant part of modern culture, but there's a long road ahead. Developers need to ensure that they push the boundaries of the medium and don't fall into comfortable genre traps. Independent developers need to avoid mimicking the bigger studios and instead find tight, focused games that appeal to new and different audiences, and, most importantly, players need to vote with their feet. You may not consider it, but every purchase that you make is having an effect on the decisions that affect which direction this industry is going in and the brightness of that future. As Blow says, "You can think of innovation as being like rocket fuel. Right now we need that fuel, in order to get that rocket to a good place. But eventually the fuel will run out so we had better be sure that we've arrived somewhere good before that happens."

So what games do you really want to play? 



"TECHNOLOGY UNLOCKS THE **POSSIBILITY OF INNOVATION,** BUT IT DOES NOT MAKE YOU **CREATIVE"**







The Players

IN CONTINUING TO DEVELOP FOR CURRENT-GENERATION CONSOLES, MANY FEEL THAT PANDEMIC STUDIOS IS FIGHTING A LOSING BATTLE. NOT SO, SAYS DESTROY ALL HUMANS! 2 DIRECTOR JOHN PASSFIELD…



JOHN PASSFIELD

PANDEMIC STUDIOS

In the videogame industry, progress tends to be rapid. Change is largely dictated by technological advancements, and as we stand on the cusp of yet another push toward gaming nirvana we would do well to ask ourselves why we bother. Relentless movement is not necessarily fertile ground for the creation of good art. Cinema existed for decades before masterpieces became regular to its landscape, and that only happened because the language of the medium remained unchanged long enough for talented individuals to master it.

Videogames have changed so much in such a short space of time – possibly more so than any other medium – and while the next generation is full of exciting possibilities, it will be years before the industry learns exactly what those possibilities are and how to get the best of them. Viewed from this angle, the decision of companies like Pandemic to continue developing major releases for the current gen while all the world seems bewitched by the shock of the new is perfectly understandable, admirable even.

John Passfield has been making games since 1984, creating a *Pengo* clone in the school holidays and managing to sell it to a local software company. From there he co-founded Krome Studios and was instrumental in creating the *Ty The Tasmanian Tiger* series. Now working at Pandemic in Brisbane, Australia, Passfield is the director of *Destroy All Humans! 2* – a game with no small amount of expectation riding on it.

"We chose to do *Destroy All Humans! 2* on PS2 and Xbox so that we could focus one hundred per cent on making a great game and not get bogged down in a new development environment," explains Passfield. "Also, the first game had such wide appeal that it made sense to reach the biggest market possible, which is on the current-generation consoles." The surprise success of the first game was deserved, and the sequel gave Pandemic the chance to fulfil some of the ambition stifled on the original.

"We're taking the most successful elements from the first and incorporating fan feedback to make this game far more ambitious than the first instalment," Passfield states. "We've made the game a true open-world environment incorporating story missions and sandbox play into the Sixties theme, and given the player the freedom to tackle the missions any way they want to. We've extended the scope beyond America, taking the player to England, Japan, Russia and another secret location. Side missions are inspired by each country, and we've streamlined it so there are no more visits back to the mother ship if you fail a mission – you always stay in the game."

He continues, "We've doubled the amount of weapons and given them numerous upgrade options, making them extremely funny. We've also introduced a new conversation system that allows the player to choose how they interact with the humans, rather than just watching a non-interactive cinematic. This has given us the ability to add in tons of new jokes and lots more of the humour that the fans love. And to top it all off we've doubled the game size, added in lots of new psychic abilities and there's also a Co-op mode".

If current-gen developing and ambition no longer go hand in hand, nobody has told Passfield. *Destroy All Humans! 2* is bigger and more polished in every way, and, along with *Okami* and *God Of War II*, provides PlayStation2 owners with a reason to be excited. Passfield accepts, however, that major current-gen releases will soon be a thing of the past. "I wouldn't say it's the last burst of creativity for current gen," he claims, "but as the user base for PS3, Wii and 360 grows it only makes sense for developers to focus their attention on these new platforms… For me personally, as someone with a strong design background, I'm really excited by the potential of the Wii. It offers designers an uncharted map of game design possibilities."

The sandbox approach of *Destroy All Humans! 2* indicates that Passfield still has one eye on the future; the open world now being a staple of next-gen releases in all genres. With *Mercenaries 2* also incorporating an open-world environment, Passfield feels the genre will soon rise above its origins in *Grand Theft Auto*. "There's so much yet to be done with open world. The first games to share a design feature are always compared to each other, but the style will soon grow into a genre of its own, much the same way that the FPS has. People have stopped comparing *Half-Life* to *Wolfenstein 3D*. I don't think it will become prevalent, but it will become a valid option for developers to consider when designing their games. I think we've yet to see the best this genre can offer."

Destroy All Humans! 2 is out on PlayStation2 and Xbox on 20 October and was previewed in issue 44.



"FOR ME PERSONALLY, I'M REALLY EXCITED BY THE POTENTIAL OF THE Wii. IT OFFERS DESIGNERS AN UNCHARTED MAP OF GAME DESIGN POSSIBILITIES"
JOHN PASSFIELD

REVIEWS

THE AVERAGE

Scoring's a messy business when it comes to videogames, so we keep things as simple as possible here at games™. Marking out of a possible ten, a game that is decidedly average will score five – that doesn't necessarily mean it's bad, just that it doesn't do anything particularly special against its peers. We also refuse to bow to PR pressure, meaning that scores are our genuine opinion: we sing the praises of the great games and give the lesser ones the scorn they deserve. You might not always agree with us, but we're just trying to help – after all, everyone has an opinion, right?

REFERENCE KIT

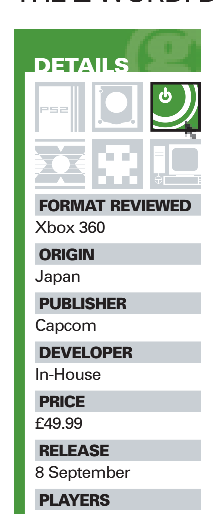
All the PC content for the magazine is tested on the über-specced Alienware Area-51™ 7500 extreme performance desktop PC. For information on Alienware products, point your browsers to www.alienware.co.uk or call them freephone on 0800 279 9751.




Ford

DEAD RISING

THE Z WORD. DON'T SAY IT!



FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox 360

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Capcom

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
£49.99

RELEASE
8 September

PLAYERS
1

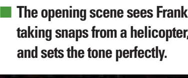
As if to firmly rubberstamp the official end of gaming's summer lull, *Dead Rising* finally arrives – along with *Saints Row* and *Test Drive* – amid huge fanfare this September. Perhaps the most anticipated title from 360's early autumn push, Capcom's latest exploration of the zombie sub-genre has been causing quite a stir ever since those first undead-drenched screenshots surfaced last year. Many doubted the game's (and 360's) capacity to produce THAT many characters on screen at once, others derided it as a *State Of Emergency* clone, but only now can we label *Dead Rising* as one of the most ambitious, shocking and hilarious games to have ever been created. This is truly a next-gen gaming experience.

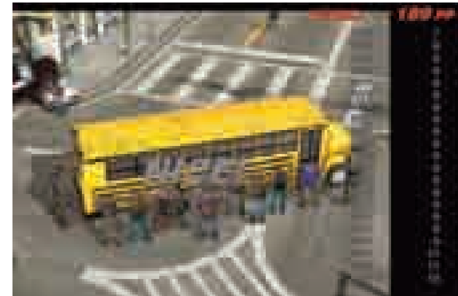
For those unaware of the plight of 'hero' Frank West, *Dead Rising* is a direct homage to George Romero's seminal horror flick/consumer satire *Dawn Of The Dead*. Set in the enormous Willamette Mall, Colorado USA, the game tells the story of the aforementioned West, a photo-journalist with questionable morals and a dogged tenacity towards his work. On the trail of a hot scoop, he charters a chopper to Willamette, and en route begins to unravel the horrific truth of exactly what is happening in this quiet suburban town. And yes, you guessed it, it's zombies. This helicopter journey provides the game's opening scene charging the player with taking photos of a number of pre-scripted undead horrors as you fly over the city. It sets the scene magnificently, and is a damn sight more interesting than the training missions that open most modern videogames. After landing on the mall's roof, West makes his way into the centre of the mall where the true scale of the 'outbreak' is uncovered – every entrance holds back hundreds of slack-tongued zombies, desperate to get inside. One slightly contrived cut-scene later, and Willamette Mall is no longer safe; it's a zombie playground.

The first hour of *Dead Rising* is one of the finest on record, in any game. Many will have already experienced the mayhem, comedy and sheer satisfaction of *Dead Rising*'s zombicide in the marketplace demo, and they will testify that it is tremendously entertaining. Using almost anything that you can lay your hands on (anything highlighted with an interactivity icon, that is), you can bat, pipe, shoot, slice, stab and bludgeon any one of the hundreds of undead specimens that litter every inch of the mall. There's so much fun to be had simply disposing of zombies that, for

> "USING ALMOST ANYTHING THAT YOU CAN LAY YOUR HANDS ON, YOU CAN BAT, PIPE, SHOOT, SLICE, STAB AND BLUDGEON ANY ONE OF THE HUNDREDS OF UNDEAD THAT LITTER EVERY INCH OF THE MALL"




The opening scene sees Frank taking snaps from a helicopter, and sets the tone perfectly.






His face is no doubt hanging off, but he still has the common sense to wear a hard hat for protection.



FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ANYTHING, ANYTIME: *Dead Rising* allows you to play it how you want, when you want.
WHAT NOT TO WEAR: Change costumes in any clothes shop. Sharp suit and Mega Man helmet?

LIGHTS, CAMERA…

Frank's a photo-journalist and, as such, walks around with his camera at all times. With a yank of the left trigger, you can take photos of anything in the game, which doubles up as a narrative device and a tool for levelling up. The game is aware of what you snap – rewarding you appropriately – so a shot of zombies munching on a civilian's head will be very profitable. It's also a test of your morality: you could save the poor woman in a sea of zombies, take her back to the safe house and level up like that, or you could just whip out your camera…

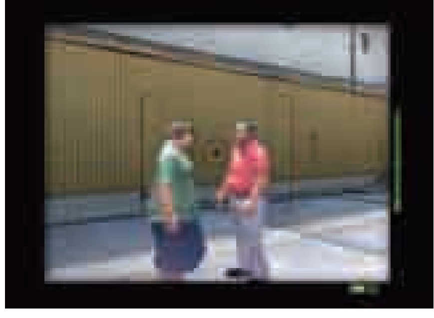


We're fine, buddy, we just need some sutures and Elastoplast.

Despite all the brilliant weaponry on offer, you just can't beat a lead pipe to the cranium.



Frank found the backs of old men's heads most fascinating.



"I tell you what, I haven't seen zombies round these parts for decades."



Sometimes things are best left to your imagination.

a long time, any notion of progression or story seems superfluous. The handy counter that keeps track of the number killed is all the encouragement you need to visit the antiques store for another katana–based zombie-culling session. Naturally, Achievements are unlocked by reaching murderous milestones. Fantastic fun.

The combat itself is reserved to one button for standard action (be it a simple baseball bat swing or as complicated as firing off a hockey puck) while the right trigger can be tugged for a manual aim, crucial for hurling a baguette at a zombie's prone head. It's uncomplicated, easy to use and perfectly suited to the game's 'kill anything that moves' ethos. The weapons, and indeed enemies, have a tangible weight to them, which adds immeasurably to the feeling of cutting through a crowd with a battle-axe. Unfortunately, it does eventually become tiresome. While at first it may feel unfeasible to ever bore of zombie murder, the lack of storyline progression eventually begins to grate, and that's when it's time to get stuck into *Dead Rising*'s uniquely structured narrative system.

Unlike almost every game ever, including Capcom's own action-adventure output, *Dead Rising* does not force players along a linear path. However, there IS a linear path to follow. This is undoubtedly *Dead Rising*'s most controversial inclusion, and a system that is sure to split opinion straight down the middle. As the game takes place over three days and three nights (in-game time, you're looking around six to eight hours), you can effectively reach the end by doing absolutely nothing, other than standing still and waiting for the chopper ride home. However, the crux of

FAQs

Q. HOW MANY ZOMBIES ON SCREEN?
It's pointless to count. More than you could ever imagine.

Q. WHY ARE THERE ZOMBIES EVERYWHERE ANYWAY?
That's the whole point of the game – it's up to you to find out.

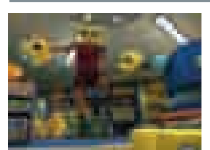
Q. IS IT BETTER THAN RESIDENT EVIL 4?
It's very, very different, but *Resi 4* just eclipses it – *Dead Rising* has flaws where *Resi 4* has none.

"THE CUT-SCENES ARE MAGNIFICENT, DIRECTED WITH SKILL AND PRECISION, WITH EXCELLENT VOICE ACTING AND GENUINE EMOTION (HELPED BY THE WONDERFUL FACIAL ANIMATION) AND SO DISTURBING THEY LEND THE GAME A BIZARRE AND UNSETTLING TONE"



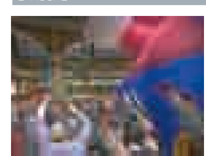
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

25 mins



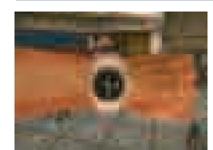
This is amazing. There are zombies everywhere, brilliant weapons, gallons of blood and a laugh every three seconds. Surely videogames can't get any better than this?

5 HOURS



The truth has been lost. Completely lost. So, the question is do you restart with your powered up Frank, or persevere to the end in ignorance? Hmm, decisions, decisions…

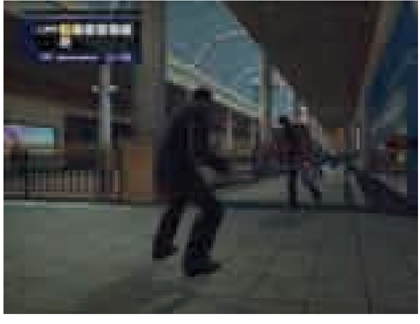
7 DAYS



Okay, so you've played through the game twice over and you still haven't found out the whole truth. What? Even after a week? Surely you've got to be close by now?

the game is discovery – you're a journalist, so you want to get to the truth. Therefore, if you can complete the key story missions within the allotted time, the surprisingly excellent plot begins to unravel. Good in theory, questionable in practice.

As it is basically impossible to unearth the truth on your very first run through the game, *Dead Rising* effectively forces players to replay the story, allowing them to keep their levelled-up Frank (more info on this later), making each run-through significantly easier than the last. Unfortunately though, this then means constantly repeating the boss battles, even more journeys between the safe house and the main mall (which involves a trip to the roof, then through a warehouse – you'll be doing this a LOT), and a hell of a lot of zombie killing. In a climate where most gamers are used to being led through plots by the hand, playing a game that doggedly refuses to tell you the story will leave many people cold. In fact, we envisage players turning to the Internet in order to uncover the truth of Willamette Mall, which is a real shame as Capcom should be commended for its ambition and determination not to follow the pack. Perhaps with more leniency in case deadlines, the system would be a lot less uncompromising and a lot more successful.



Sporting goods make excellent weapons, as *Dead Rising* proves well.

Thankfully, if and when the thread of 'truth' eventually evaporates, you are left with a number of choices. The obvious 'reload' will be the primary port of call for many, but too often the damage is already irreparable – actions taken much earlier in the game's timeline mean there's little hope in rescuing the truth. Aware of this, Capcom has allowed players to restart the whole game at any time, with Frank in his current state. As you progress – killing zombies, saving civilians and defeating bosses – you will level up RPG style, gaining health, item slots and combat moves along the way. The stronger your Frank, the easier it is to get to the truth, as you now know. It's not perfect, but it beats having to finish the entire game time after time.

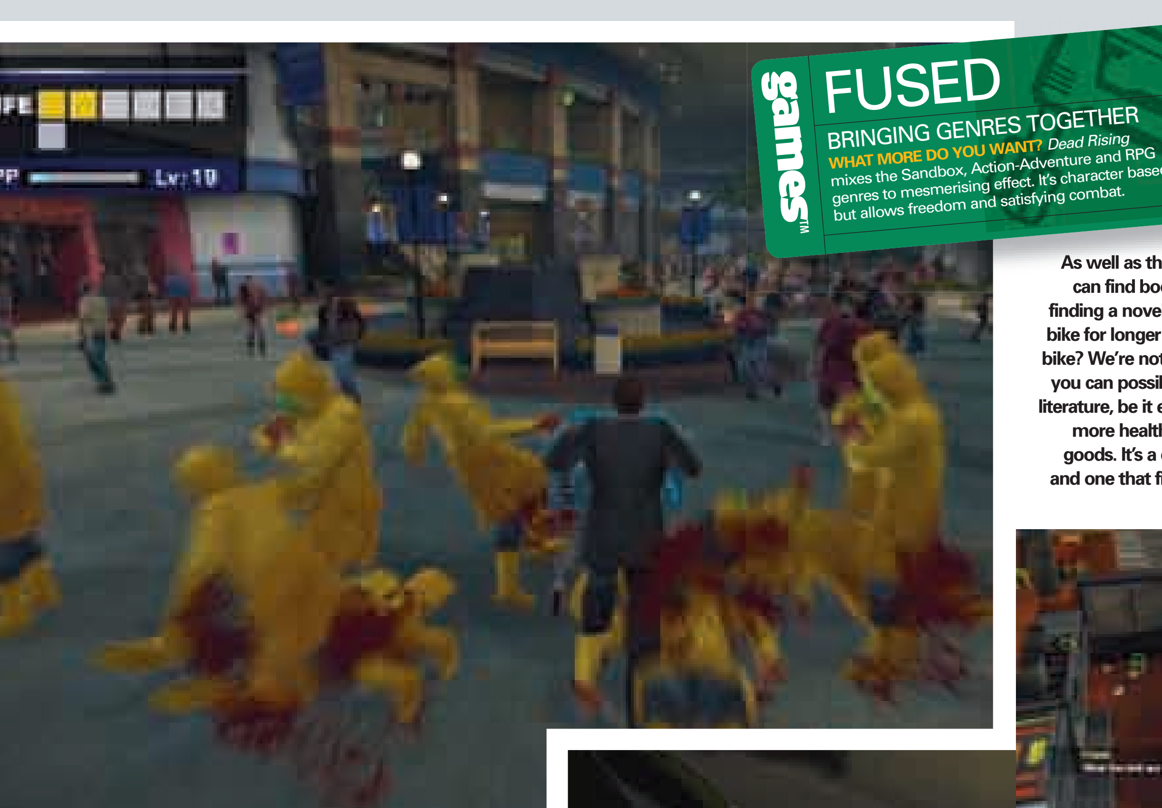
However, it's the superfluous missions and tasks that prove *Dead Rising*'s saviours. Throughout the game, security guard Otis will contact you via walkie talkie to inform you of 'scoops' – interesting occurrences in the mall that would be well worth Frank's time. Most often it's

As the stifling numbers of zombies to batter drags on, repetition does eventually set in.





Willamette Mall – er, no, we don't think we'll be paying that place a visit any time soon.



FUSED

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

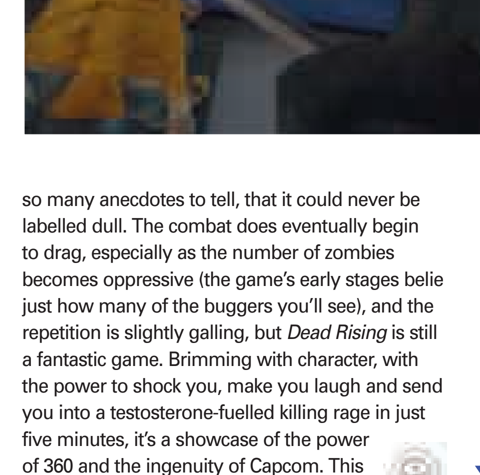
WHAT MORE DO YOU WANT? *Dead Rising* mixes the Sandbox, Action-Adventure and RPG genres to mesmerising effect. It's character based, but allows freedom and satisfying combat.

READ BETWEEN THE LINES

As well as the standard levelling-up process, Frank can find books to increase his skills. For example, finding a novel about cycling will allow you to ride a bike for longer (oh, you didn't know you could ride a bike? We're not about to ruin everything…). Any skill you can possibly imagine is covered by the in-game literature, be it extra item holding, stronger weapons, more health or even better abilities with sporting goods. It's a completely unique and clever system, and one that fits in perfectly with *Dead Rising*'s very videogamey idiosyncrasies.



Groovy. The chainsaw provides some seriously bloody fun.



It's the equivalent of standing in the corner with a lampshade on your head – the zombies will never see you.

someone to save from a zombie horde, but other times it can lead to one of the game's psychopaths – truly deranged, cut-scene-triggering nut jobs that act as the game's bosses. The first one you'll meet is a terrifying, schizophrenic, chainsaw-wielding clown, whose introduction and demise are so disturbing that they provide a complete contrast to the cartoon violence of the main game. And this is a theme that underpins *Dead Rising*. The cut-scenes are magnificent, each one directed with skill and precision, with excellent voice acting and genuine emotion (helped in no end by the wonderful facial animation), and so disturbing that they lend the game a bizarre and unsettling tone. The juxtaposition of Tobe Hooper and *Tom And Jerry* is quite unlike anything we've seen in a game, and a tremendous achievement.

By keeping players constantly engaged, *Dead Rising* succeeds where many other sandbox games have failed. You may never get to the 'truth', but there are so many people to save, and so many anecdotes to tell, that it could never be labelled dull. The combat does eventually begin to drag, especially as the number of zombies becomes oppressive (the game's early stages belie just how many of the buggers you'll see), and the repetition is slightly galling, but *Dead Rising* is still a fantastic game. Brimming with character, with the power to shock you, make you laugh and send you into a testosterone-fuelled killing rage in just five minutes, it's a showcase of the power of 360 and the ingenuity of Capcom. This is next-gen gaming.

VERDICT 8/10

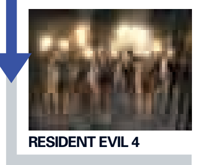
SUPERBLY AMBITIOUS – ONLY LET DOWN BY REPETITION

STATE OF EMERGENCY



MUCH BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN

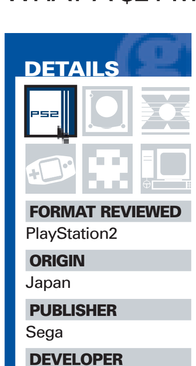


RESIDENT EVIL 4

YAKUZA

WHAT A $21 MILLION DOLLAR BUDGET GETS YOU THESE DAYS…

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Sega

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
£29.99

RELEASE
15 September

PLAYERS
1

When screenshots of *Ryu Ga Gotoku* – *Yakuza*'s Japanese title – first appeared, fans of Sega's classic *Shenmue* got rather excited. Here was a game that looked remarkably like Yu Suzuki's cult hit with a huge free-roaming city, action-RPG mechanics, and fighting interludes. Yet *Yakuza* is a very different beast. Or, if it does share some traits – the bustling cityscape, the vivid characters, the frequent one-man-against-heavy-odds fight scenarios – then it's *Shenmue*'s Hollywood remake: a louder, bolder, darker game that loses a little charm in the translation, but makes up for that with a pacier, twistier story bolstered by some truly brutal action sequences.

Stepping into the snakeskin shoes of enigmatic lead Kazuma Kiryu after a ten-year stretch in the slammer, it's your job to uncover a web of lies and half truths threatening to tear the foundations of the Tojo clan – one of Tokyo's largest Yakuza gangs – apart. The story is best experienced cold, but suffice to say it involves a nine-year-old girl, a missing childhood friend, 10 billion stolen yen and more double crosses than you can shake a heist movie at. It's a spellbinding plot told with swaggering confidence and cinematic flair, and the cut-scenes reveal some beautifully realised character models, with an above-average English dub helping create some charismatic and memorable protagonists.

The neon-glazed city of Kamurocho that is the main setting for the game – and which is entirely free-roaming after a couple of short chapters – is based upon the real-world town of Kabukicho, and is an impressive recreation. The attention to detail is astonishing at times – from the authentically jaunty ditties blaring out from the Don Quixote megastore, through to the bottles of Jack Daniel's and Carlsberg in the bars, and the genuine Japanese products in the grocery stores. Much of the city is non-interactive: the crowds of people on the streets are almost purely for atmosphere – although a few offer snatches of dialogue and useful info – while many shops and bars are inaccessible but still add to the authentic Eastern flavour. It's a convincing illusion, which is why you wish Sega had been a little braver and kept the vocal work in the native tongue. It's disconcerting to be stopped by a street gang hurling abuse in English, but that just makes them all the more deserving of punishment when the game switches to Battle mode.

Gripping story aside, it's in this Battle mode that *Yakuza* really shines. The third-person view from the exploration sections is kept, the camera zooming in tighter to frame the action. Far from the balletic combat of the *Shenmue* and *Virtua Fighter* games, *Yakuza*'s scraps are dirtier, rougher, more vicious. It's a brawler – brash,

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG?
Rush through the story and you have around 15 hours of play time; at least double that if you take your time and find everything.

Q. SIDE-QUESTS?
Loads. Plenty of other stuff to do as well – massage parlour mini-games, fighting tourneys, crane grab arcades, casinos…

Q. UNLOCKABLES?
Pleasingly, yes. The Premium Box allows you to view all the cut-scenes, play sub-missions or fight condition-based battles.

URBAN REIGN

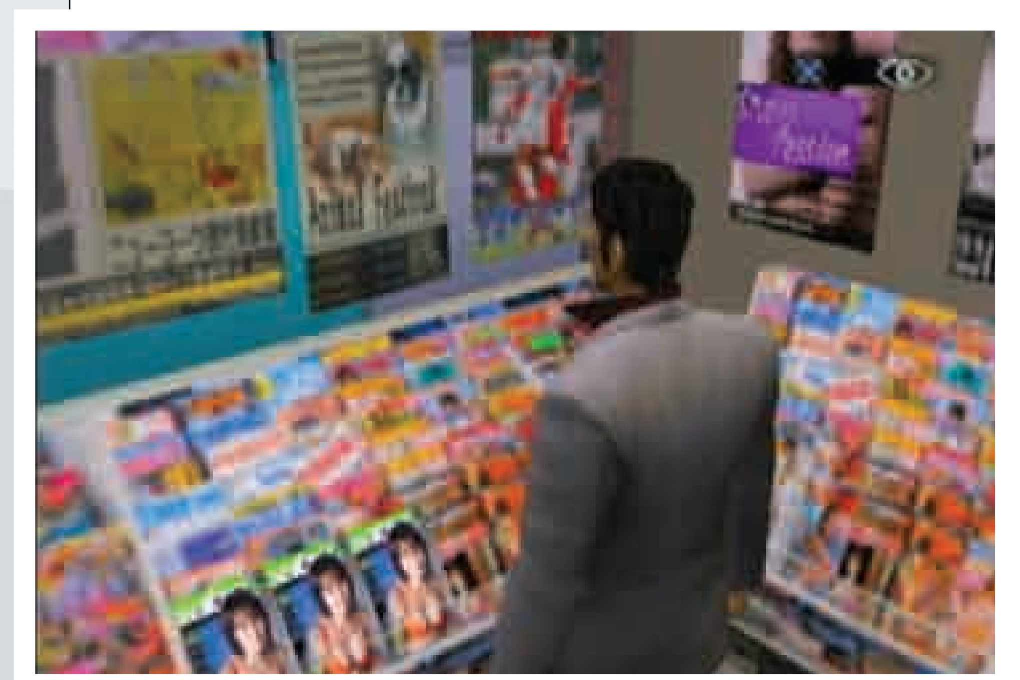


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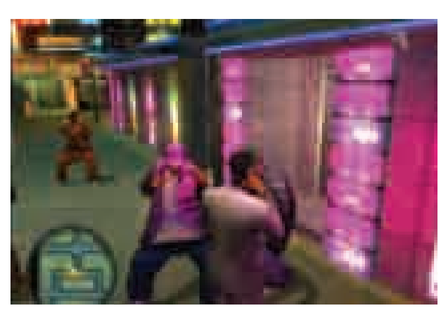
AS GOOD AS



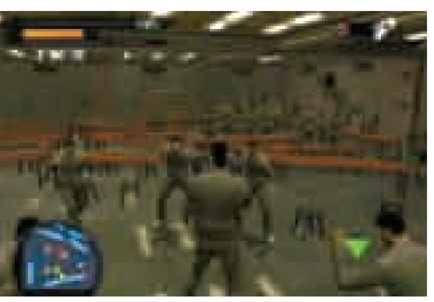
SHENMUE II



Unfortunately there's no *games™* in the magazine rack, but that's obviously because it's sold out.



Some of *Yakuza*'s barneys are pretty damned vicious. Trust us, you wouldn't like to meet these people down a neon pink alley.



It all kicked off down the clink when the kitchen staff announced they had run out of Turkey Twizzlers.

■ The sprawling city is expertly realised and teeming with life; it's one of the most evocative game environments ever created.

bloody and bone-breakingly brutal – whose initial economy of moves belies a surprisingly flexible system. At first the variety comes from location and enemy type rather than an exhaustive list of combat manoeuvres. But with the amazing array of weaponry available – knives and bats, stray chairs or bicycles, even giant cones – the fights which are *Yakuza*'s brand of experience-building random encounters never get dull. Stringing moves fills up Kazuma's Heat Gauge allowing more powerful attacks, and diverse context-sensitive actions keep things fresh – from slamming an enemy's skull into a wall to brief button-mashing cut-scenes which have you straddling tougher adversaries and repeatedly pounding them into the tarmac. What it lacks in elegance it more than makes up for with intensity – every contact is really felt. It's not particularly pretty, but boy is it satisfying.

Yakuza gets so much right that its flaws unfortunately seem that bit more noticeable – the problems with the English dub go further than lip-synch mismatches (see Found In Translation) and the camera can be very unhelpful – the nadir being an early boss fight, where your enemy moves around so much that it's more use to follow the radar than rely on the static viewpoints the game offers. The loading times are an annoyance too; if you're accosted on the street it can be 15 seconds before starting a fight, while there's occasional evidence of graphical corner-cutting, which is unexpected in such a lavish production, though that might be more of a hardware issue than developer laziness.

Ultimately, *Yakuza* should be praised for overreaching, rather than criticised for what it doesn't achieve. It's rare to see a game so ambitious in terms of story and scope, and it's a good sign that, with the PS3 just around the corner, people are still trying to push the older hardware further. This is a game with a lack of subtlety and finesse at times, but as an action-RPG – one stuffed with memorable moments, touches of crowd-pleasing bravado, an immersive plot, and virtually no padding – it's up there with the best on the console.



■ Underground uber-informant Kage is morally ambiguous, so you're never really sure whether he's on your side or not…

games™

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THE GAME UNIQUE

BAD BOYS: There are some genuinely evil and surprisingly dark twists to the labyrinthine plot.
PAINKILLERS: Nip to the chemist for some Staminan Royal to ease your aches, or to a local bar if it's Suntory time.

VERDICT 8/10
A STORY WELL WORTH EXPERIENCING

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

While it's unusual to have Japanese locations juxtaposed with English audio, *Yakuza*'s voice actors are mostly up to the task. While contributions from Mark Hamill, Eliza Dushku and Michaels Rosenbaum and Madsen are welcome, it's two non-Hollywood stars that shine the brightest. Bill Farmer as Date and Darryl Kurylo as the lead, Kazuma, fufil two of the most important roles admirably. It's a shame the non-vocal dialogue isn't up to the standard of the acted scenes, with too much lazy profanity – there's enough swearing here to make Tarantino blush.



■ Even yakuza need to nip down to the shops every now and again. Now, what'll it be – a bag of Minstrels or a tube of Smarties?



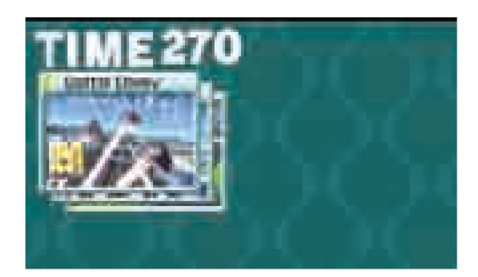
■ Yakuza can turn bloody dark. By dark we don't just mean the lighting; we mean really nasty. The bar massacre is one such example.

FINGERPRINT

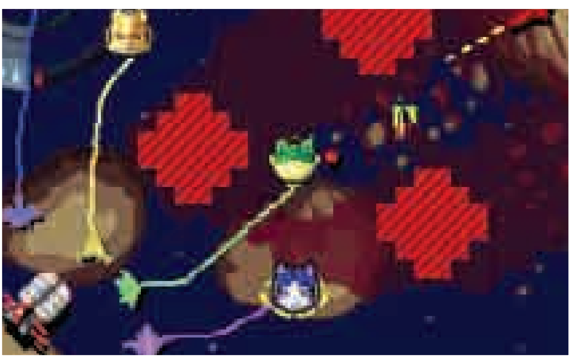
games™

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

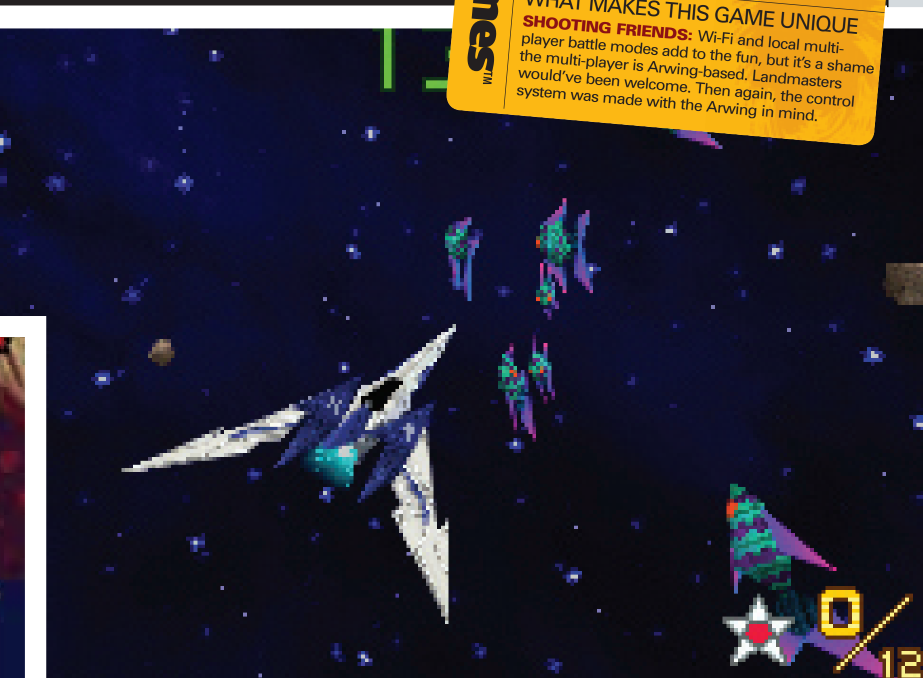
SHOOTING FRIENDS: Wi-Fi and local multi-player battle modes add to the fun, but it's a shame the multi-player is Arwing-based. Landmasters would've been welcome. Then again, the control system was made with the Arwing in mind.



Extending the time limit you take into missions is key. If you're shot down or you run out of time before completing a mission, the result is death.



Where there's cosmic dust that may be covering enemies, you can use the stylus to disperse a limited amount of the stuff on each turn.



The wonder of space travel has never been this wonderful on a handheld. *Command*'s graphics fall somewhere between *StarFox* and *StarFox 64*, but on the small screen it looks fantastic.

STARFOX COMMAND

NINTENDO BRINGS STARFOX HOME AND REINVENTS THE 'WING



FORMAT REVIEWED
Nintendo DS

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Nintendo

DEVELOPER
Q-Games

PRICE
¥4,800

RELEASE
TBC Q4 '06
(Japan/US: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1-6

There's a brief history of innovation in the *StarFox* series. It begins with the Super Famicom original's use of the FX Chip for 3D visuals, continues with *StarFox 64*'s introduction of Nintendo's Rumble Pak accessory, and then abruptly stops. That's where Nintendo unwisely transferred Fox McCloud and pals to developers who didn't fully appreciate the series' heritage – yes, we're looking at you Rare and Namco. But not to worry, because *StarFox Command* was developed back at home in Kyoto with Nintendo's trusted friends at Q-Games, a small studio that includes members of the original StarFox team, and McCloud is resolutely back on form.

The great innovation this time is centred on stylus control. Control is applied according to the direction of your strokes, yet the touch screen also displays a map of the stage mounted centrally. Meanwhile, various dashboard options, such as loop-the-loops, U-turns, bombs and speed boosts all drawn near the edges of the touch screen, can be effected with a tap of the screen. In practice, this system conveys the sensation of freedom in flight much more effectively than any D-pad setup. It's intuitive to the extent that you'll quickly stop looking at the touch screen and instead play from instinct. It feels perfect – like experiencing *Pilotwings* for the first time all over again, or like flying a kite.

StarFox Command is also a cerebrally satisfying title. Building on the tactical elements of *StarFox 2* – which remains unreleased – you enter each area of the Lylat System with an overview of potential threats to the mothership, which it is your responsibility to defend, displayed on an *Advance Wars*-style battle map.

Variable factors – the amount of ships alongside Fox at any time, the number and position of enemies and missiles, weather conditions and more – all combine to switch on the button inside your brain marked 'Tactics'. Progress in *Command* hinges on the strategic use of limited turns of movement around the area map and, when battles and missions begin, the ability to fly and shoot in the Arwing.

Our only real gripe with *StarFox Command* is that you can reach an ending after just a few hours of play. On each subsequent visit, however, routes through the System do change and the difficulty level gradually increases, although boss characters never become too difficult to beat. In total there are nine different endings to see. There is volume here, you just have to look for it. More importantly, there is a new kind of fun here – and you don't have to look for that, it's as plain as day. Excellent.



VERDICT 8/10
AN AUDACIOUS YET SUCCESSFUL REDESIGN

STARFOX ADVENTURES



BETTER THAN

AS GOOD AS



STARFOX 64



The backgrounds, or 'themes' aren't great, but they accompany the music pleasantly enough.



The game's timing and level of responsiveness is faultless.



The Calorie-Counting mode tells you exactly how fit or fat you actually are.

games™ FINGERPRINT

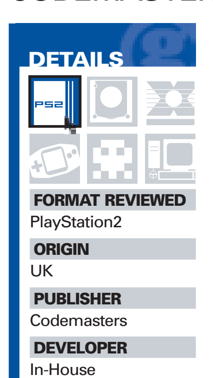
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CHOOOON: The unique ability to pick your own music should not be overlooked – it stands as an absolutely brilliant feature that takes the genre to a new level.

DANCE FACTORY

CODEMASTERS DELIVERS THE ULTIMATE DANCE MAT PACKAGE

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

ORIGIN
UK

PUBLISHER
Codemasters

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
£29.99

RELEASE
29 September

PLAYERS
1-2

Here's a lesson for any marketing types out there. It's likely that *Dance Factory* would have never made it onto the hallowed games™ review pages if it wasn't for its press release. We tend to ignore the majority of copycat casual gamer sims that appear on PS2, so only when a piece of paper entitled 'Dance Factory – Why You Should Give A Shit' landed on our desks did we take notice. After two pages of humorous, knowing and refreshingly BS-free prose, it was apparent that *Dance Factory* could well be the ultimate dance mat videogame. And it is.

You see, *Dance Factory*'s rather ingenious USP is that it allows you to put any CD into your PS2, and it will convert it into arrows for your dancing pleasure. Simple, but absolutely superb. And it works. After experimenting with tunes from Rage Against The Machine, Air, Metallica, Sway and even a bit of classic old-school house, it would seem *Dance Factory* cannot be beaten. Using the same technology that fuelled *Vib Ribbon*, the game picks out beats immaculately, creating combo opportunities at every turn. Obviously, not every tune you pick will lead to a perfect 'dance', but half of the fun of *Vib Ribbon* was finding which tunes worked best, and the same can be said of *Dance Factory*.

Although graphically sparse, *Dance Factory* offers EyeToy compatibility so you can watch yourself bounce around like a fool, a calorie counter, an Endurance mode (can you dance to a whole album non-stop?), and the ability to record your own dance steps to any song you like, and save it to a memory card. Oh, and it has full two-player functionality. There's even a mini-game to play while it reads the music from your CD. It's a tremendously complete package.

Our solitary gripe with *Dance Factory* is the lack of a decent combo counter. While the game does keep a count of your best run and shows it to you post-dance, not having it on-screen during the song is a bizarre choice. Half of the fun in *Dance Dance Revolution* is the panic that sets in when you manage to rack up a huge combo: a feeling that is upsettingly absent here. Also, the lack of licensed tunes (and the quality of the ones that are there – Pussycat Dolls anyone?) is disappointing, but to focus on that is to miss the point. This is a game that's all about innovation, and this is the only way in which Konami's dancing games could be bettered. *Dance Factory* is a superb product that deserves to be noticed, and as such Codemasters should be commended. Good things happen to those who write entertaining press releases. A lesson learned.



RAISES THE BAR FOR DANCE MAT GAMES

DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION



BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN

VIB RIBBON

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox 360

OTHER FORMATS
PC, PS2, PSP

ORIGIN
France

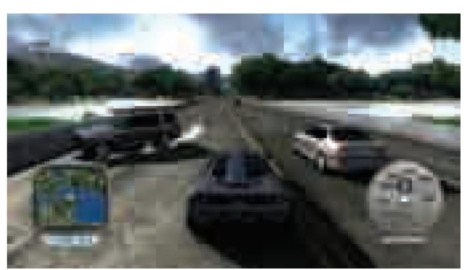
PUBLISHER
Atari

DEVELOPER
Eden

PRICE
£49.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
1-8



This driver made the right choice and didn't swerve into us. AI panics often.

TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED

WHEN EVERYONE IS SPECIAL, NO ONE IS

Over a thousand miles of road web stretching from volcanic mountains to the shore; urban built-up areas are complemented with car dealerships and fashion emporiums. You'll have your top down and your designer-labelled garments on. This is a big one, perhaps the big one. It's massively online and set across Hawaii's Oahu paradise with over 90 vehicles available to test drive, buy, own and tune for 360 available races and the race editor. Unfortunately, the island is the backdrop to a videogame that's scale doesn't match its execution.

It's important to highlight the difference between driving and racing. If you're not going anywhere under pain of failure, you're driving. If you have a time limit or up to seven other racers, you're racing. This is *Test Drive*. Much of the entertainment is taken from simply driving and, while you can teleport to races, dealerships and other areas of interest, you can only do so once you've driven to their locations. You'll be driving a lot. You may decide to motor the circumference of the island just because you can, and it's at this point that we'll point to that flashing light in your wing mirror. It's the fuzz, and they want to charge you 50,000 dollars for driving like a bastard. Even when just driving, you must be cautious.

Test Drive Unlimited is a duplicitous charmer. It gives you 90 cars and bikes to try out, and the suggestion is that they'll all differ in ways known to reality. We could break the cars down into a sliding scale. The cheaper rides handle like they're autistic: the more expensive the car the better your chances of keeping on the road when turning at speed. There are some weight characteristics that make heavier cars noticeably bullish, but in general you'll want to buy a more expensive vehicle mainly because they hang on the road with more conviction and can be entered into exclusive races. The game's driving assistance has four settings. Fully on it's leaden

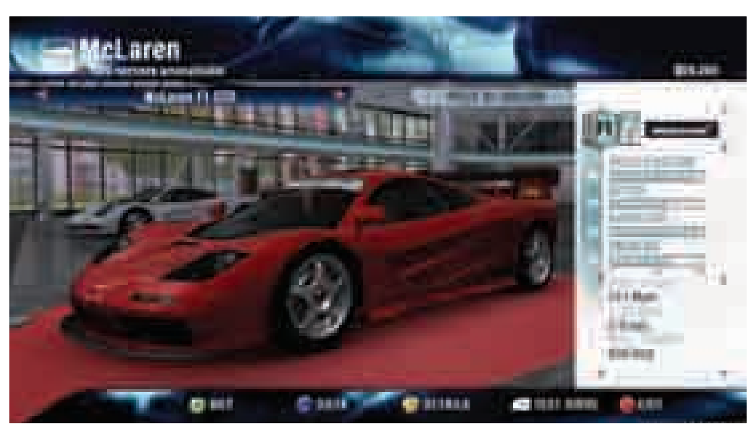
Two vehicles collide with a closing speed of 200mph – one stops and the other continues. What? It's a truck.

FLAGGING YOU DOWN

***Unlimited* has three types of driver. There's you, there's the traffic that's supposedly escaping from *Frogger* and there's the opposition. If you're playing online, the opposition will be real-life human beings; offline they're AI bots who often crash. When near either a human or a bot you can ask them for a race, detail what sort of race it is on the map… and race. These one-on-one battles don't have restrictions so you can take on a midget as a giant, but don't expect to win big money. $50 for a race is not unusual if against AI. Whatever you do, don't crash near a copper.**



Get to speed and enjoy as the graphics melt into a blur. Convincing?



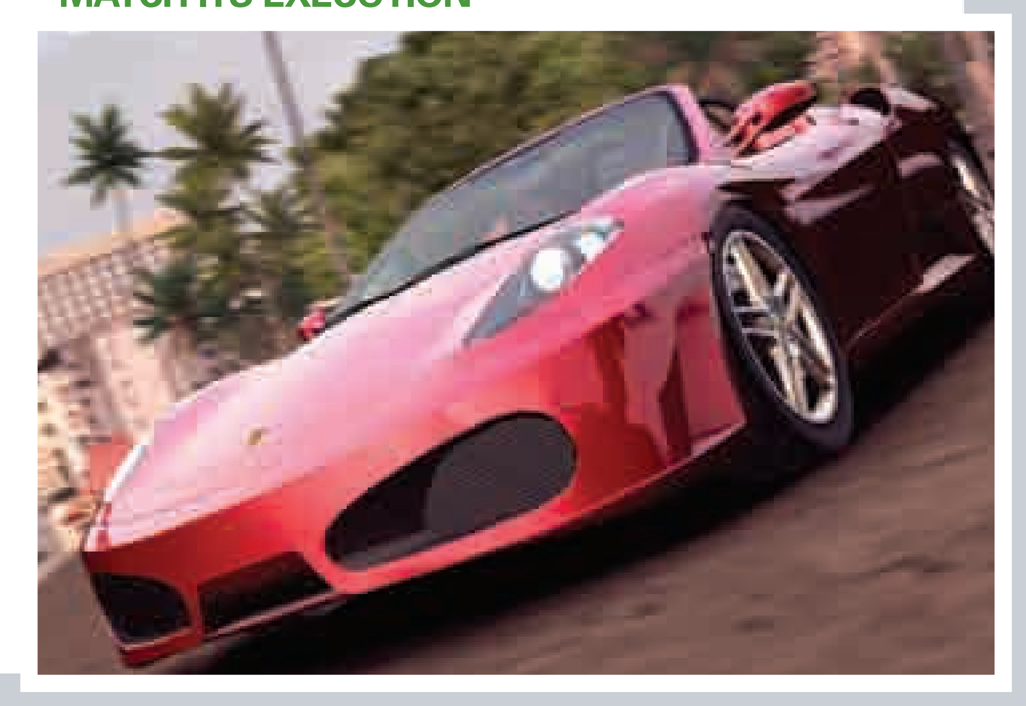
Of course you want it – it's expensive and therefore more suited to Hawaii.

and unresponsive; fully off it's more flighty yet still not convincing. Unlike *Forza*, *TDU*'s handling never really finds its niche. Car modification is similarly limited.

The game's biggest trick, despite its scale and scope, is the way it drives your buying desire more by necessity than choice. Any sense of freedom is broken on the grounds that the island is mostly green hills, emerald glades, blue sky and grey roads and also that urban sprawl and the vehicles are rarely engaging to drive. While the island may be an accurate GPS recreation of Oahu Island and impressive for that fact, there are only four states for the weather: clear sky through to overcast. With no night sky whatsoever, there is no real sense of time passing on your travels around the island, and the same green hills, emerald glades, blue sky and so on become monotonous and tiresome. Imagine how involving it would be to leave your home at dusk, drive through the night – towns and scenery presenting new challenges and fresh perspectives – arriving at your destination as dawn breaks. Pity.

There are challenges for driving through oncoming traffic or against a clock or other drivers, as well as challenges from some very slim Hawaiians who want you to give them a lift with their shopping. To enter any race, you'll need a car that meets the race's restrictions. The

"UNFORTUNATELY, THE ISLAND IS THE BACKDROP TO A VIDEOGAME THAT'S SCALE DOESN'T MATCH ITS EXECUTION"





This officer knows where we are because we are directly in front of him.

more you race and explore, the more races and challenges will appear on the map, until you're presented with a Christmas tree sparkling with choices. While you can test drive any car from any dealership, you'll need to own or rent one to enter it in a race. You'll have to make money to buy cars, and then use these cars to enter new races – ten minutes in a Maserati will set you back tens of thousands. Despite being set in the freedom of an open world, you'll still find yourself in classic racing game country. Race, lose, get better, win, save, buy new car and race some more. Or go for a drive and potentially lose money by hitting other cars, or even lampposts.

So you'll be driving a great deal, and that's when we come again to the police. Cops all look like the same blonde woman in tight jeans and she doesn't like people who cause accidents. You'll often want to avoid driving, and instead use the game's map to teleport to previously discovered races and showrooms. If you punk yourself into another car, you'll get the first of three flashing shields. The cops are looking for you albeit quite casually. Three shields and they will create roadblocks. Catch you and the fine will be based on what class you are – the better you get, the better your driving class and therefore the higher the penalty. The tally can quickly get astronomical should you be renting that Maserati – getting caught could bankrupt you. It's all fair when you're driving like a Charlie, but let's say hello to The AI Behaviour Of Other Cars.

We've been hit by The AI Behaviour Of Other Cars that have panicked at our very existence. One notable example sees the *games™* mobile scraping along a concrete barrier as if drunk on cough syrup. This scene was so shocking to an oncoming driver that they swerved violently away from a pleasantly clear road and into our bonnet. Cops often don't mind you scraping your own paintwork on some civil engineering, but they have zero tolerance should another car decide that the best way to avoid you is to run right into you. Don't expect a simple exchange of insurance forms. You're now wanted by the law. You are a bad person. Either you wait for them to find you and pay the fine immediately or try and lose them. While it's easy to dispose of a single shield, and it's not beyond the abilities of man to ditch a three shield warning, there's still a good chance that you'll meet a blonde lady copper after landing a great deal of damage in an expensive car. Once you've lost 50 grand in a single fine you'll decide one of two things: either you drive with more caution and thereby not treat your vehicles like the toys they should be, or warp around the map instead thus denying yourself the majesty of the island as an all-surrounding experience.

The GPS often sends you the long way around, but for chrissake keep your eyes on the road.

FAQs

Q. HOW ABOUT THE BIKES THEN?
As with the cars, they're nicer to look at than to race.

Q. DOES IT LOOK LIKE THE SCREENSHOTS?
Yes, but often you'll be driving through areas as bald as MSR.

Q. WHY DIDN'T YOU MENTION THE ELECTRIC WINDOWS?
Okay, Poindexter, cars have electric windows that affect acoustics, though you can't put the roof up.

WORLD RACING 2

BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN

PGR 3



games™

GLOBAL

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

MASSIVELY ONLINE RACING: Hawaii is one massive server waiting for everyone to join.

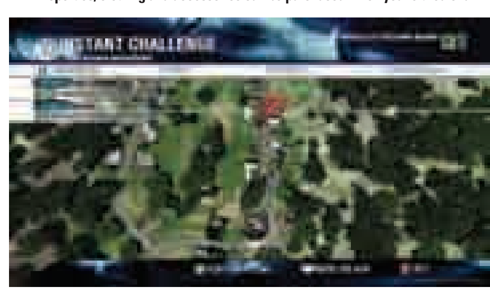
FRIENDS REUNITED: The online game will favour friends; you won't race thousands at a time.

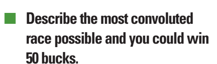
SAVED BY HUMAN INTERVENTION

***Unlimited* has a big smiley face because it's massively online. Thousands of players can be on the island at once, but the game uses tricks to stop the island turning into a logjam. If you've met and raced another player before, you're more likely to meet them. Your Friends List is also used to show buddies but hide random strangers. Live play does add a new dimension to proceedings, but it works out a little different to any other Live experience. Chatting on Live while doing anything has always been enjoyable and it is here. Not quite miraculous, then.**



Properties, clothing and accessories can be purchased when you're tired of driving down blank roads.





Describe the most convoluted race possible and you could win 50 bucks.

When customising races, you can chose the conditions of the race. Other traffic? Time limit? Will you get penalised for receiving damage? Will there be cops? These criteria are set individually for all races, which means you can drive down a busy street to find a race, activate it and find that the road has been cleared of cops and traffic. Obviously, this is needed to keep races clean, or, if needed, quite dirty, but it almost always places them outside the context of the idea of a living island. As beautiful a mixture of green, blue, yellow and green as it may be, it really just acts as a giant hub.

There are many aspects of *Unlimited* that rub, but when viewed as the entire racing experience that it so wants to be, great things begin to shine albeit subtly. As is the rule of the genre, you'll spend the first few hours stuck with cars that fail to inspire, driving in races that can easily be won as you save your cash for something more exciting and respectful to the road, but will cost you more should you crash. Expensive cars get higher fines. Justice? The rewards for the player who just picks up the game for a quick race are nowhere near what you'd find in *PGR*, or even *Burnout*. You have to invest time existing in the game world itself; driving with caution when needed, entering races that you have already won simply to pick up another couple of grand, and being an entity in *Test Drive*'s fractured reality. It's a title that you have to bathe in rather than dip, and it takes its fair time in making you feel drenched. Even then the feeling is more akin to dampness.

Test Drive Unlimited is occasionally excellent when racing against humans, yet remarkably pedestrian when simply going for a spin. While they forgot to inject enjoyment into the single-player experience, *TDU*'s online environment is where the excitement lies, which we'll look at next month.

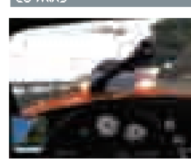
VERDICT 7/10

EXCITING CONCEPT LACKING SINGLE-PLAYER THRILLS

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

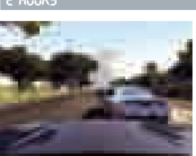
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

20 MINS



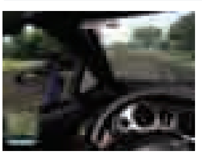
This car handles like a filled nappy. Best race and earn money.

2 HOURS



This car handles like a half-filled nappy. Best race and earn more.

10 DAYS



If it weren't for online you'd never make it here.

PS2 (£39.99)

A cut-and-shunt of the 360 version that provides less thrills and more stopping and starting. While the fact that they've tried to implement *Unlimited* on a PS2 should be lauded, there's no denying that this is a much reduced version of a game that only really needed better racing to convince – and PS2 has some decent racing games.

"IT'S A TITLE THAT YOU HAVE TO BATHE IN RATHER THAN DIP INTO, AND IT TAKES ITS FAIR TIME IN MAKING YOU FEEL DRENCHED"



THE GHOSTEST WITH THE MOSTEST

ULTIMATE GHOSTS 'N GOBLINS



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation Portable

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Capcom

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
£34.99

RELEASE
Q3 '06

PLAYERS
1

***Ultimate Ghosts 'N Goblins* implies a fair degree of the superlative, doesn't it?** It might even suggest that it could pose something of a challenge. In fact, this remake does more than that: it flat out barges you in the shoulder, spills a clear third of your pint, leans over to its friend and laughs in your general direction. No, there's no getting around it, *Ultimate Ghosts 'N Goblins* is one of the most difficult games you're ever likely to play. Thank God for infinite credits.

There's more here than you might expect from such a dusty title though as Capcom, without taking anything away from the ageless delight of 2D-scrolling platforming, has managed to revamp *Ghosts 'N Goblins* with considerable proficiency. What remains is the game's purity. You're still noble knight Arthur, you're still left stomping around the place in boxers should you lose your armour, and you're still confronted by an impossible weight of ghosts and, indeed, goblins – it's just that very little concession has been made to those who aren't good at games. In Arthur's quest to save his damsel in distress, various additions have been made, but sadly they go little way to making things even slightly more manageable – they do, however, offer a little extra depth. A baffling array of pick-ups are dotted around the levels and with the right ones equipped Arthur can fly, glide, block attacks and unleash life-saving magic attacks. Added to that, the new range of weaponry does much to liven things up, and makes it pretty much essential to use them to their fullest in order to collect the 20-odd rings it takes to complete the game. It's an absolutely gargantuan effort to collect all the shiny gold pieces, and we did have a lot of fun doing it… in between bouts of fierce compound swearing, that is.

Fans of the original will appreciate the cleverly blended mix of aged gameplay and splendid visuals. Of course, there's little about the core mechanics that will excite any more contemporary gamers, but for pure soul, and a surprising suitability to PSP, *Ultimate Ghosts 'N Goblins* is a superbly playable title. Eminently timeless, suitably gorgeous, but unutterably difficult. Everything you want in a retro revamp.



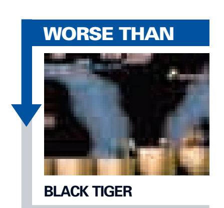
VERDICT 7/10
HARD FUN

GHOSTS 'N GOBLINS



BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN



BLACK TIGER

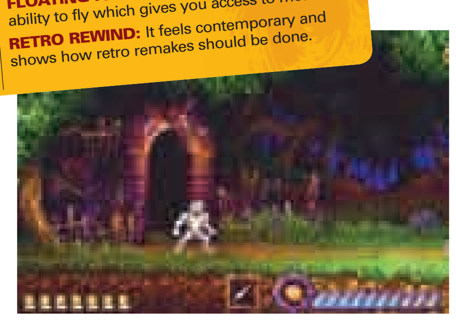
FINGERPRINT

games™

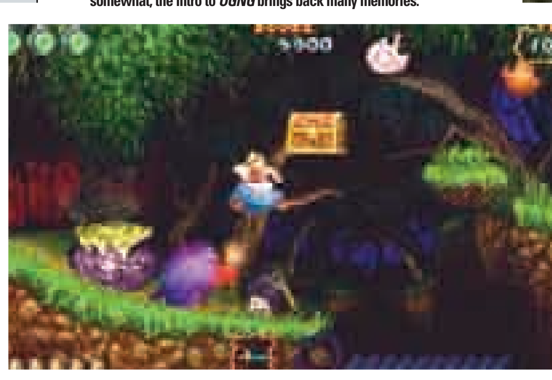
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FLOATING FREE: The best innovation is the ability to fly which gives you access to more areas.

RETRO REWIND: It feels contemporary and shows how retro remakes should be done.



Although it's been revamped and the visuals upgraded somewhat, the intro to *UGNG* brings back many memories.





The classic impossibility of the franchise. As far as we can tell, you have to lose a life to progress here.

MORE FUN THAN JEAN-CLAUDE VAN DAMME IN BREAKIN'

B-BOY



DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

OTHER FORMATS
PlayStation Portable

ORIGIN
US

PUBLISHER
SCEE

DEVELOPER
FreeStyle Games

PRICE
£29.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
2

Understandably, this is an easy target for gaming purists to snipe at, but *B-Boy* has an equally good defence. When the thump of The Alkaholiks kicks in, it's almost impossible to resist tapping a foot to the beat and being lured in, no matter how temporarily. *B-Boy* just about stops itself from drowning in urban culture like *AND1 Streetball* did and keeps itself the right side of fun, something that shines through with each song that perfectly fits the game's aesthetic.

Sadly for FreeStyle Games, *B-Boy* has to be judged as a game and not a soundtrack, and it's in this area that its confidence wavers. In trying to strive for a near impossible balance between accessibility and creativity, an easy answer has been decided upon: present animations and dial-in combos. The only stumbling block is the fact that you have to tap the shoulder buttons in time to the beats, but that's as in depth as *B-Boy* gets. The accessibility is right, but the creativity is lacking as you don't feel like you're in charge of your own destiny. Instead, you're all too aware that you're simply jumping through the hoops set by the developer and getting judged on your dancing. Needless to say, this also handicaps its multi-player potential, where battles turn into a contest of who can keep the beat rather than who can show off the most creativity. This is a shame because everything is in place for *B-Boy* to dazzle. The Career mode drip-feeds just enough new moves to keep you playing and, surprisingly enough, the animation is convincing and lends real weight to the moves. With sliders for creativity, combos and other factors, there is at least some incentive to keep your combo count high and vary what you do, something that's called upon as the face-offs increase in difficulty. There's even a soupçon of pride in your character as you build him or her up with new clothes or moves – something that's strangely absent in most games and, stranger still, present in this.

However, *B-Boy* is undermined by the fact that you're going through the predetermined button taps rather than inventing your own freestyles, and even then you spend more time watching the beats and cues at the bottom of the screen than you do your dancer, which defeats the entire purpose of the game. It's a fun, frothy take on a scene that could have easily led it to drown in detestable ghetto references and excessive urban nods, but even though *B-Boy* manages to avoid travelling that dangerous path, it remains no more than a guilty pleasure.

VERDICT 5/10
HELD BACK BY TIRED GAMEPLAY MECHANICS

AND1 STREETBALL

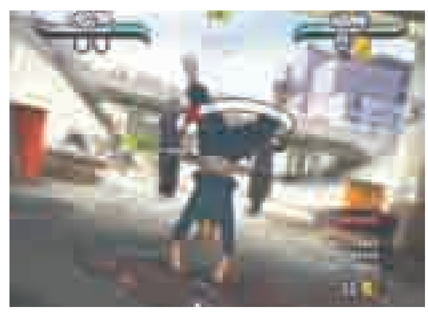


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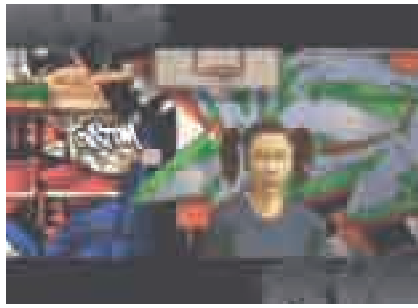
WORSE THAN



DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION



Now, here's one we can all do – providing there's a wall to lean our feet against.



You have to unlock clothes to dress your character up. Still can't do anything about their gormless look though.



The trademark 'Baby Freeze' move, although we're sure most of you will recognise it anyway.

DISGAEA 2: CURSED MEMORIES

PREPARE TO DROOL, RPG FANBOY…

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Koei

DEVELOPER
Nippon Ichi Software

PRICE
£34.99

RELEASE
27 October
(Japan/US: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1

You're not a demon, but everyone else is. For the majority, it's a sublime and pleasant existence. However, you don't like being the social pariah and so must find and defeat Demon Overlord Zenon to lift his curse and restore unwanted humanity to the world. As you progress you can visit the Demon Court to petition with devilish councillors for more shop items and apprentices, downgrade your characters to Level One to beat that high-level boss and enter Item World to fight demons inside each of your inventory artefacts in an effort to increase its power. Why not tell your friends all about *Disgaea 2: Cursed Memories*? Then don your straightjacket and wait for the men in white coats to arrive – they'll think you're completely nuts.

A game with a premise this bizarre should never make mainstream gaming, let alone be as successful as 2003 hit *Disgaea: Hour Of Darkness*. Similarly, a Western developer could never have forged this sequel: some of the ideas are so surreal it's as if it's been chemically conceived. But the core mechanics of tactical role-play mesh so fluidly with the outlandish Japanese innovation that even the most lucid role-playing gamer will be willing to overlook the myriad oddities and develop a narcotic addiction to *Disgaea 2*.

The tongue-in-cheek humour sets the offbeat mood from the outset with a kooky anime introduction involving main character Adell's mother using some of her children's life force in a demon-summoning ritual that goes wrong. These charming sequences frequently punctuate the game and provide a light break from the intense tactical phases during the main quest. For the majority of the game it's little more than mildly entertaining, though some of the dialogue is so questionable – including Adell being accused of sexual harassment by his precocious little brother – that it's certain to provoke an incredulous chuckle.

Main characters and plot aside, *Disgaea 2* hasn't made a huge departure from the original with a few cameos from other Nippon Ichi games thrown in for the fans. Some new combat features have been added, and the dark court system has been revised. But as *Disgaea* had such a big following and this is only the second game in the series, we suppose that Nippon Ichi didn't want to alienate its cult fan base by radically changing or watering down the game for the mass market.

At the heart of *Cursed Memories* is the turn-based tactical combat phase that challenges your progression throughout the game. At a low level, most of your team of up to ten characters can perform basic attacks with their main weapon and a special ability whose effect is determined by the character's class: healers heal, fighters perform special melee attacks and mages cast offensive spells, for example. These abilities increase in

FAQs

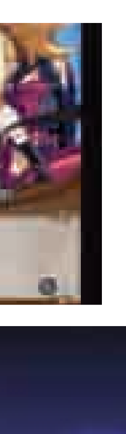
Q. ER, ITEM WORLD?
It's a randomly generated, multi-level stage within each item that increases its attributes upon completion.

Q. AND DOES EVERY ITEM HAVE IT?
Yup. Even common and single-use items have their own microcosmic world replete with baddies to kill and treasure to loot.

Q. AND THE POINT IS?
It gives your team an opportunity to gain a lot of experience and lends *Disgaea 2* almost unlimited replay value.

Comic anime sequences punctuate the main quest. They're skippable but worth watching.







Geo Cubes don't take sides; destroy them when they work against you.

DARK COURT SUMMONS

The Dark Court enables your characters to petition for additional game enhancements such as an extended shop inventory, additional characters and harder or weaker enemies. In a similar process to that of the early *Final Fantasy* games, the Dark Court also allows characters to be 'reincarnated' – effectively changing jobs by returning to Level One but retaining the stats and special abilities of their former selves. All enhancements require mana accumulated in battle and some require a Dark Assembly hearing where appropriate bribes can swing the vote in your favour. *Disgaea 2*'s revised Dark Court sees the player rewarded for corrupt actions and even chastised for playing it fair.



■ Why can't the world have these guys on the American senate?



■ Ranged special attacks are especially useful for less robust characters.

power and can be augmented by continual use affecting the development of each character.

In addition to the range of actions each character can perform, for *Disgaea 2* Nippon Ichi has revised the battle combo feature that allows each side to perform a team attack by standing adjacent to each other. Small combos are often fairly ineffectual, but they only use the turn of the character that instigated the attack, and with a little planning, they can be of considerable strategic value. This enhanced combat phase and massive range of new abilities and classes has broadened an already deeply varied game.

Battlefield environments also form an active part of combat with the introduction of geo panels and geo symbols: single-cell pyramids that sit atop a coloured panel, enhancing or damaging the attributes of a character for the duration they're on a cell of the corresponding colour. This is yet another facet to an already highly sophisticated system and while geo panels make combat slightly more interesting, it's as if Nippon Ichi has tossed this not entirely necessary feature in for the sake of detail overkill.

To make them more accessible and thus more profitable as they reach a broader base of fans, many big RPG series have become more storyline and less gameplay focused. Notable in this respect is *Final Fantasy*, which has become more linear and diluted as it's progressed from one console to the next. Serious RPGs have traditionally been the domain of the hardcore PC gamer, so it's great to see Nippon Ichi move against the trend and shrink the void between platforms. *Disgaea 2: Cursed Memories* remains loyal to its hardcore fans, feeding their appetite for detail with more statistics, strategies and over a hundred hours of gameplay. This is an intimidating prospect for the casual PS2 gamer, but a worthwhile purchase for anyone who derived any pleasure from any tactical RPG on any platform.



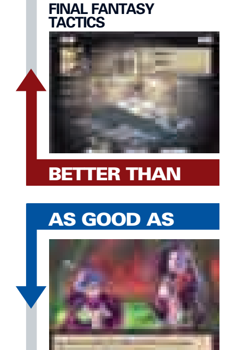
TURN-BASED RPG NICHE FUN

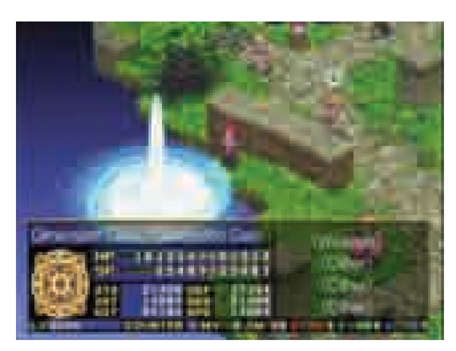
games™ MISSING LINK

WHAT'S MISSING FROM THIS TITLE

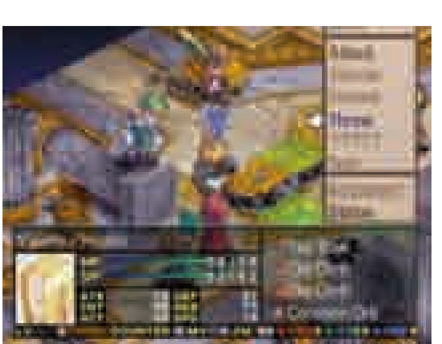
360° COMBAT ROTATION: Sometimes you just can't get the right viewing angle.

GENERAL ACCESSIBILITY: Not for general consumption. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing.

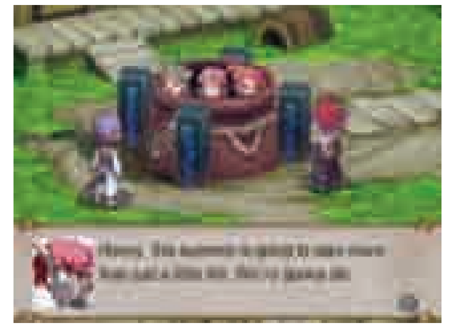




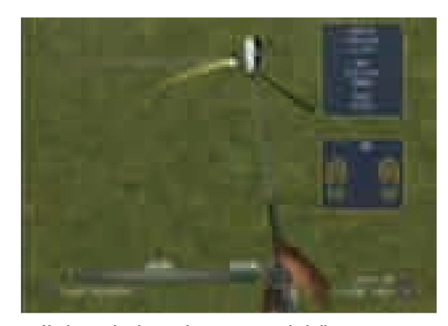
■ We reckon you can take the Dimension gate. We dare you…



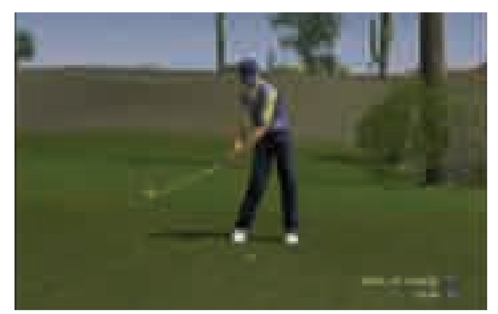
■ Throw your buddy Mario style when they've used their movement up.



■ Demons have no conscience, which lends itself to comic moments.



You know what they say: keep your eye on the ball. All shots are played from a first-person perspective.



Golf just wouldn't golf without a Pringle tank top. Some baggy knickerbockers would round the whole look off nicely.



FYI: Graphically, the PSP version of *ProStroke* is nearly identical to its console counterparts. The lack of a second analogue stick, however, means that the unique control scheme had to be dropped in favour of a more traditional button-and-stick combo that's not as intuitive, but just as functional.

games™ FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

STICK IT TO 'EM: By using both analogue sticks to control the shot, *ProStroke* gives more accurate control over hook, slice and pitch while also reducing the number of fumbled shots.

PROSTROKE GOLF: WORLD TOUR 2007

BROAD STROKES AND WILD SWINGS

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

OTHER FORMATS
PlayStation Portable, Xbox, PC

ORIGIN
UK

PUBLISHER
Oxygen Interactive

DEVELOPER
Gusto Games

PRICE
£29.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
1-4

Golf games are much harder to design these days. Without the expensive likenesses of professional players, a new golf game needs to have some neat tricks up its sleeve in order to woo prospective buyers. New methods of control like the Gametrac or one of Nintendo's 'market disrupting' formats can help, but without those aids the traditional golf game will find itself struggling to compete in a crowded market.

ProStroke Golf succeeds by delivering a dual-stick control system that builds on past innovations and tweaks them to their logical conclusion. As in EA's *Tiger Woods*, shots are controlled by manipulation of the analogue stick, but where *ProStroke* differs is that the swing and hook or slice are separated across the two sticks. Each shot is taken from a first-person perspective using the left stick to determine the angle at which the club strikes the ball, while the right stick controls the power and speed of the hit. In adopting this method, Gusto has removed the risk of accidentally sending the ball in the wrong direction, and increased the accuracy of shot preparation and the final swing in order to create a simulation that feels closer to the real sport.

Aside from the welcome control modification, *ProStroke* remains stubbornly traditional, managing to tick every box on the product description checklist. Customisable characters, commentary and real-life courses are all present and correct although, oddly, the licensed players may only be controlled by the CPU. The other feather in *ProStroke's* cap is the extensive course design kit: a flexible and comprehensive editor that allows every aspect of an 18-hole course to be designed in detail. Course shapes, hills, bunkers and greens may all be stretched and distorted with the analogue sticks while incidental objects like trees, bushes and walls can be placed anywhere on the course. Put the effort in and it is possible to create imaginatively designed courses or even simple recreations of your local pitch-and-putt – although there's no denying the pleasure of designing an almost impossible course to be shared with friends.

Thanks to its unique control scheme and accomplished course designer, *ProStroke Golf* manages to stand out from the crowd of me-too golf games and should be first choice for serious golf fans. The modified swing mechanics mean more time must be taken over every shot, and ensure Tiger Woods remains the most accessible golf game, but *ProStroke* is easily the title for those who find a lack of challenge in its competitors.

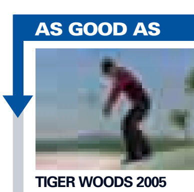
VERDICT 7/10
INNOVATIVE CONTROLS AND LONG-TERM APPEAL

REAL WORLD GOLF



BETTER THAN

AS GOOD AS



TIGER WOODS 2005



This is the best view for dogfighting, but it isn't nearly as exciting as the Outside-The-Plane view, as we've dubbed it.



Every death is followed by a replay and multiple angles, so you can see exactly where you went wrong.



ACE COMBAT ZERO: THE BELKAN WAR

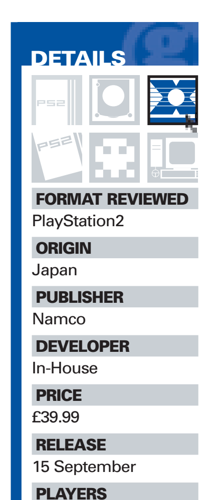
ACES HIGH OR A ZERO?

games™ ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MULTIPLIER: *The Belkan War* hasn't improved upon previous games, but the two-player addition is nice with modes from air races to dogfights. Surprisingly, the air races are more enjoyable.

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Namco

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
£39.99

RELEASE
15 September

PLAYERS
1-2

If you've played an *Ace Combat* game, you can take a fairly accurate guess at what *The Belkan War* features: long missions, accessible gameplay, moral ambiguity and dogfights. The reason we say fairly accurate is that you've probably assumed that this sequel will smuggle some new changes under its surface. It doesn't. The only thing remarkable about *The Belkan War* is how unremarkable it is, showing an unwillingness to move beyond its comfort zone

This is both its strength and its weakness. As with the rest of the series, *The Belkan War* has arcade blood flowing through its veins. You get plenty of advanced warning about incoming missiles and, in true *Top Gun* manner, extreme manoeuvres tend to shrug them off. With unlimited ammo and unlimited fuel (time limits are the order of the day instead), there's only a missile count to worry about, which shows the focus of *The Belkan War*'s tilt: combat.

As you don't have to worry about subjecting your aircraft to whatever manoeuvres are necessary to escape trouble, this gives Namco Bandai carte blanche to throw trouble at you. Even though all missions essentially boil down to the same thing, it's this willingness to throw you straight into the action that serves *Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War* well in the long run as you're never afforded a moment to settle once the action kicks off. Given the limited palette of dogfighting that *Ace Combat* is working with, *The Belkan War* does an admirable job of feeling fresh for as long as it does.

However, when monotony does eventually sink its teeth into later missions, *The Belkan War* struggles to break free. All too often missions introduce enemies right at the death as a way to artificially increase the difficulty, which results in a frustrating death as you crawl back to the restart screen. It's also worth noting that as good as *The Belkan War* is, it's nothing but more of the same, which isn't a ringing endorsement that will bring veterans back to the series; they might find the monotony kicks in a lot sooner than most. Still, for an under-represented genre, this is entertaining enough.



VERDICT 6/10
UNAMBITIOUS BUT FUN WHILE IT LASTS

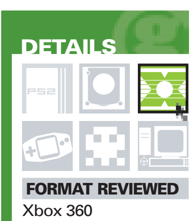


OVER-G FIGHTERS
BETTER THAN
WORSE THAN
CRIMSON SKIES

SAINTS ROW

HAS THQ ANSWERED OUR PRAYERS?

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox 360

ORIGIN
US

PUBLISHER
THQ

DEVELOPER
Volition

PRICE
£49.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
1 (2-12 Online)

Some games require a couple of run-ups before the business of reviewing can actually begin. Every review needs to have an angle, and games of true originality can make forging one a difficult process governed by trial and error. Generic games are a different matter. Their similarity to other titles makes a context very simple to grasp with a viable critical approach obvious almost immediately. *Saints Row*, on the other hand, is an exception – a game so similar to the *Grand Theft Auto* series that the line between critical objectivity and simply berating a game for plagiarism evaporates like morning mist.

Here we have a game that doesn't so much borrow the skeleton of *GTA*, as take the whole body and rename the parts. As much as THQ might wish it weren't so, the now ubiquitous cries of 'copycat!' are fully justified – though that doesn't stop it being lazy criticism. Sceptics have been screaming "*GTA*-clone" at *Saints Row* since it emerged at E3 in 2005, and perpetuating that tendency two years later speaks of a lack of effort more than colossal insight. Simply put, and for all the enormous change the games brought about, the *Grand Theft Auto* series was an absolute joy to play, and as long as the gaming public is willing to take off the pedantic hat there's no reason why *Saints Row* can't be too.

In combating the possibility of suffering by comparison, *Saints Row* made its first mistake very early on. Similarities are rife throughout, and jarring moments of déjà vu are inevitable, but it boggles the mind as to why the developer chose American urban gang culture as the backdrop. Chronicled so expertly in *San Andreas*, the most recent *GTA* game in the series, this was always going to be a sticking point, especially when the target audience is likely to be *GTA* fans. Beyond this the vast majority of similarities are simply in the details, all of which cease to be important after an hour or two of play.

The task Volition set itself was to improve on all the areas where the *GTA* format came up short, thereby creating a better game. Now, *Saints Row* can't claim to exceed the achievements of the *GTA* series, but Volition has certainly tightened up the gameplay. Combat is more intuitive and satisfying here – aiming is less sensitive, there is far more cannon fodder to occupy you, and the frustrating automatic lock-on of *GTA*'s more powerful weapons is wisely excluded. Driving, too, has been given an overhaul, with a superbly natural handbrake making cornering at speed a pleasure. And let's face it, in *Saints Row* you take every corner at speed. This isn't the sum total of Volition's endeavour, but it was wise to target these specific areas for attention. A major criticism

FAQs

Q. SO, MINI-GAMES THEN?
Yes. In order to play a mission you must first increase your respect level through mini-games.

Q. EXAMPLE?
Stealing prostitutes for other pimps, playing a hitman, drug trafficking, destroying everything in sight.

Q. ISN'T THAT ANNOYING?
Surprisingly, no. You are forced to play, but the games are engaging, and naturally broaden your skills.

DRIVER: PARALLEL LINES



BETTER THAN

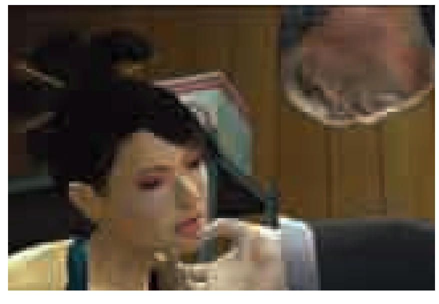
WORSE THAN



GTA: SAN ANDREAS



Shoot from the ground and the train can be blown clean off the tracks.



Saints Row's cut-scenes are surprisingly effective and packed with inventive direction.



Saints Row 'benefits' from a character creation option. Yes, you too could wear a lot of gold and puce.

■ Now, we're not saying that killing cops is cool, but our man does look pretty cool in this picture.

of *GTA* is the repetitive drive/shoot mission mechanic; in *Saints Row* these two activities, the game's fundamental anchor, are that much more pleasing to engage with. As we say, combat and driving aren't the sum total of Volition's endeavour, but they are the two changes we would happily see grafted onto Rockstar's next epic.

All other differences are relatively minor, and many of them are likely to divide the audience, *Saints Row*'s character creator being a prime example. There's an argument to suggest that the game benefits from being able to personally customise your appearance. Then again, your character seldom speaks, and lacks the personality of, say, CJ from *San Andreas*. The ability to set waypoints is similarly divisive. Some – **games™** included – see it as a welcome addition removing the need to constantly reference the map, reducing the risk of becoming lost and allowing you to concentrate on the fun stuff – driving fast, and dangerously at that. Others, however, have lamented it as needless handholding, lauding personal navigation and the confusion that inevitably brings as part of the overall experience. That the waypoints are optional seems to fall on deaf ears.

Where *Saints Row* should be an unqualified success, and where it surprises as a relative disappointment, is in the visuals. That all next-generation games look lovelier than those from the current-gen has become scripture, but the graphics here do not astound in the way we had hoped. The cut-scenes are very well done – great dialogue, interesting camera angles, superbly voiced – and

games™ FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE
WAYPOINTS: No more fiddling with inaccurate maps. More time to mow down pedestrians.
CUSTOMISATION: Pimp your ride and pimp your face. There are mod-shops and plastic surgeons on the Row.

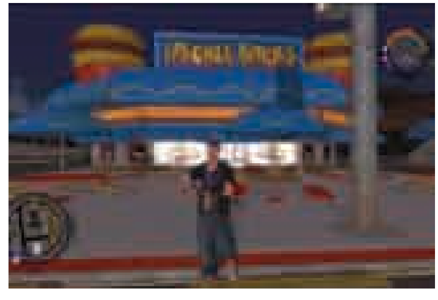
the rag-doll physics and fire effects synonymous with next-gen games are in full force, but the visceral lick doesn't feel so far away from many current-gen titles. A superficial concern to be sure, but when coupled with the slowdown and graphical bugs that surface when things get a little busy, it trips *Saints Row* up in the one area that should have been a walk in the park.

This is, perhaps, symptomatic of the game's major drawback. In attempting to fine tune all of *GTA*'s foibles, *Saints Row* has invited unfavourable comparison on itself. It is a dangerous game to play, particularly when the quality of the competition places expectation so dauntingly high, and while it's difficult to think of a single area that *Saints Row* is significantly worse than *GTA*, it's just as testing to find enough ways that it's significantly better. There was a major jump in scope and ambition between each instalment of the *GTA* franchise, but the world of *Saints Row* feels, if anything, smaller and less detailed than that of *San Andreas*. Rather than the huge leap forward expected from the next-gen's first real foray into the open-world, this feels too much like a step to the side – polished, involving and a great deal of fun, but current-gen in all but the smallest details. If *Saints Row* were handed to us as *Grand Theft Auto IV* we'd almost certainly believe it, but we'd also be disappointed. A huge compliment, but a backhanded one.

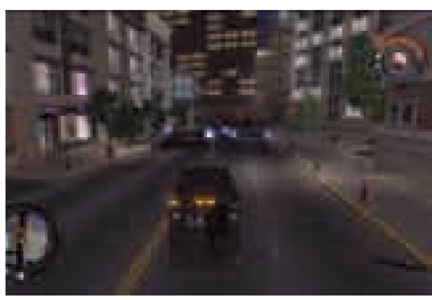
VERDICT 7/10
GREAT FUN, BUT LACKING IN AMBITION

ICING ON THE CAKE

An extremely welcome addition, and one that nearly pushed *Saints Row* to a higher score, is the Multi-player mode. It is unlikely to take over *Halo 2* as the king of Xbox Live, but it does offer further fun once the already extensive main game has finished. The highlight of a hands-on was 'Protect The Pimp' – a game with one team trying to kill the hilariously attired pimp, and the other trying to protect him. A full Live Test will feature in a future issue, but for now this is another reason to pledge your allegiance to the Saints. If only until *GTA IV* shows up.



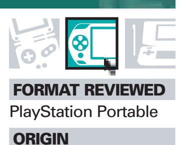
■ Freckle Bitch's sells fast food which can be stored in your inventory and used to replenish health.



■ Lazy criticism would be to label *Saints Row* as a… wait for it… '*Grand Theft Auto* clone'. We aren't lazy – read our review and see for yourself.

PAINT LONDON TOWN RED WITH THE BLOOD OF COCKNEY GEEZERS

GANGS OF LONDON



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation Portable

ORIGIN
UK

PUBLISHER
SCEE

DEVELOPER
In-House

PRICE
£34.99

RELEASE
Out Now

PLAYERS
1-2

You can't fault Sony for trying to aim the PSP at every possible market. After a few generic releases it gives us the wonderfully bizarre *LocoRoco*, which is niche to say the least, and now we get the cockney crime-'em-up *Gangs Of London*, which is about as populist as you can probably get.

Based around the much-criticised but decent-selling *Getaway* series that was released on PS2, this portable translation shares visual similarities with its forebears but little else. Obviously it's set in London, but as far as any sort of narrative or plot goes, there's very little to be found. However, that does seem to be intentional, as the aim of the game is to take over the 31 sectors that London is divided into with one of the five, clichéd gang types.

This takeover is achieved through various on-foot and vehicle-based missions, with mixed success. While there's a decent amount of variety in mission types, the execution, particularly in the on-foot sections, is lacking. As ever the absence of a second analogue nub drags the controls down and they take some getting used to. Don't get us wrong, they're not the worst we've encountered, but they're far from perfect. Driving is slightly better, as long as you remember to turn the analogue sensitivity down to its lowest setting. Also worth a mention are the cut-scenes that divide the missions. While they're simply static, graphic-novel-style images, the voiceovers that accompany them bring each one to life.

Elsewhere away from the main game is a wealth of mini-games that are impressive both in volume and quality. Traditional pub games like pool, skittles and darts can all be played against the CPU or another player if you pass the PSP around; *Gangs Of London* has no Wi-Fi modes. A *Risk*-style strategy game is also present requiring you to take over London one piece at a time, only with cards. One mode with tongue firmly in cheek is the amusingly titled 'Four Weeks Later' that sees you running around town taking out zombies. This is no *Dead Rising*, but it's a welcome diversion from the main game.

While *Gangs Of London* doesn't have a fantastic pedigree, it's still a decent enough PSP release. Without the mini-games, we'd find it hard to recommend this due to the dubious controls, but with the game being fleshed out so well with extras it becomes a decent little package… if you don't mind the brutally excessive swearing, that is.



VERDICT 6/10
A DECENT EFFORT, GUV

CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY
SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE: Find a mate to beam the game to and they'll get a level set in the underground that's built around the MAC address, which is different on every PSP. Clever, eh?

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE



BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN



GRAND THEFT AUTO: LIBERTY CITY STORIES

Darts is a fun diversion but won't take long to beat unless you're utterly inept or crap at maths.





Taking cover is key to success in gun battles. The blind fire is something that comes in handy but isn't found in enough games.

BLADE DANCER: LINEAGE OF LIGHT

PSP EXCLUSIVE THAT PLAYS IT BORINGLY SAFE



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation Portable

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
NIS America

DEVELOPER
Hitmaker/SCE Japan

PRICE
$49.99

RELEASE
1 September (Japan/US: Out Now)

PLAYERS
1-4

PSP has been somewhat lacking in decent RPGs, and when loading *Blade Dancer,* or simply reading the manual, it's instantly apparent that Hitmaker, in conjunction with Sony, was playing it safe when creating what is touted as a wholly original and exclusive RPG for the system. Unfortunately while it is indeed exclusive and has been made from scratch, by taking no risks it's also almost devoid of any originality, and comes across as banal and clichéd in the extreme.

The storyline is the same rehashed tale of a spirited young man searching for adventure, who inevitably has to save the world. Naturally, he's then joined by two femme-fatales: one is silent but strong while the other is a pretty but delicate young waif who heals. Rounding off this archetypal band is the strong, silent male who appears to be imposing but deep within is a friendly idealist.

The battle system, contrary to the shockingly flagrant lies printed on the box, is turgid and definitely turn-based. Not that turn-based battles are intrinsically bad, but, when as uninspiring and generic as in *Blade Dancer*, they make you want to dash the PSP against your eyeballs. Lengthy bouts of levelling are necessary (initial difficulty is high), while weapons have an endurance level which depletes and results in breakage. It's an annoying and artificial way to increase length. The music is forgettable, the visuals merely functional.

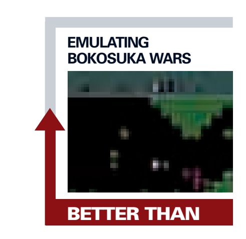
Blade Dancer comes across as a cynical title developed purely to be hailed as an exclusive, yet some things are executed so well, it's not without merit. The cover is exquisite, the intro is beautiful and features the original Japanese song, and when you start a new game you're given the choice of Japanese dialogue with subtitles. It's a shame that a videogame deserving few sales has undergone such excellent localisation by NIS America.

Beyond superfluous extras, the only highlight is the Item Crafting system. Items collected (like rare weapons) can be appraised and broken down into their basic ingredients, for which you'll be given a recipe to replicate them. Ingredients are both dropped by enemies and sold at stores; items cost more than the ingredients that create them, so crafting saves money. You can even ignore recipes and try random mixing of items. While crafting becomes an essential task due to weapons breaking so frequently, it's one of the few sections of *Blade Dancer* that proves even remotely fun. Simply put, *Blade Dancer* is an RPG lacking in character, soul, and most importantly, entertainment. Not recommended.

VERDICT 3/10
HOPELESSLY GENERIC AND DERIVATIVE

CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY
FOR FOUR: To make it seem distinctive, *Blade Dancer* features a wireless LAN function supporting up to four players. Severe limitations, few dungeons and not receiving EXP or gold render it useless.

EMULATING
BOKOSUKA WARS



BETTER THAN

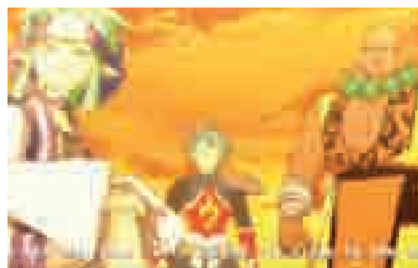
WORSE THAN



MONSTER HUNTER



This is the Item Crafting screen. You will learn to love it because it is the highlight of the game.



More games need to have exquisite anime-styled intros featuring the original Japanese songs. Pity the game itself is dire.



Here we see a combined group attack. The turn-based battles may look exciting, but they're actually infuriatingly tiresome and very restrictive.

ENCHANTED ARMS

AN RPG TURNING POINT FOR 360?

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox 360

ORIGIN
Japan

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

DEVELOPER
From Software

PRICE
£49.99

RELEASE
8 September

PLAYERS
1 (2 Online)

To date, *Enchanted Arms* is officially the most popular next-generation offline tactical RPG in Japan. This is because Xbox 360 is currently the only next-gen console and this is its first offline tactical RPG. It's an oversight on Microsoft's part not to have penned in a few more games of this ilk sooner considering 360 hasn't been all that well received in the East. The genre, conceived by Square back in the annals of gaming history, is most popular on its native turf, but with more than a year to go until the release of *Final Fantasy XIII* on PS3 and the console market saturated with derivatives of the legendary *FF* franchise, perhaps Microsoft feels comfortable resting on its 'king of console' laurels, instead turning to Japan's From Software to establish it as the next-gen RPG console of choice?

From Software's back catalogue includes *Lost Kingdoms*, incidentally one of the first RPGs available for GameCube. It was a popular game and achieved decent review scores, but notably it was criticised for being more tactics than role-play; a strong emphasis on the tactical battle phases but shallow gameplay otherwise. So while the opportunity to play *Enchanted Arms* had a few of us twitching with excitement, there were a few reservations among the team.

It seems From Software has taken lessons in RPG-making from SquareEnix in devising a detailed storyline full of dynamic heroes, cataclysmic events and a generous pinch of *Final Fantasy* melodrama. *Enchanted Arms* is set in a post-magic, high-technology world peppered with 'Enchant' schools, and devoid of true magic since the Golem Wars over a millennium ago. True, it's not a very original tale, but it is familiar enough to seize the attention of RPG aficionados.

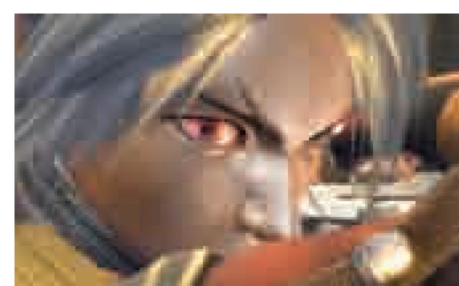
The plot and characters take the same safe route as the setting, relying on hackneyed twists and stereotypes that would make an eight-year-old roll their eyes. Atsuma (yes, he's the one in orange) is the dim-witted protagonist with a mysterious past that he can't remember and a right arm with powers he knows nothing about. Initially he's accompanied by classmates Toya, the intelligent ladies' man and Makoto, whose bad camp act will have the gay gaming community in tears of laughter. Typically, this prescribed team of up to four characters changes according to the development of the plot as you progress. There are 25,000 lines of fairly sophisticated dialogue and it's frequently entertaining to see the interaction between characters. In fact, if it wasn't for this distraction, then it might be a lot easier to see past this gloss to the somewhat translucent plot.

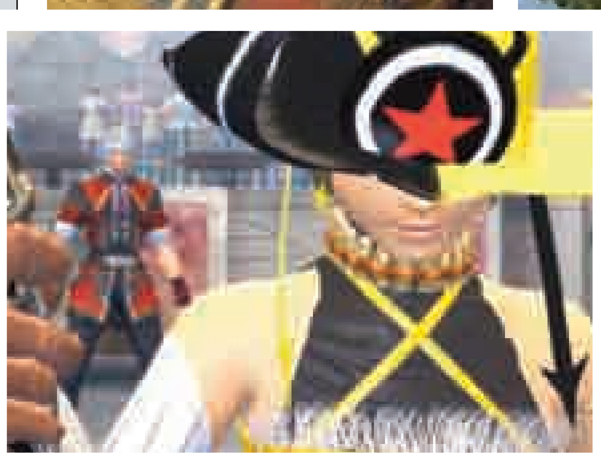
FAQs

Q. PLOT COMPARED TO FINAL FANTASY?
Just as epic, tragic and melodramatic.

Q. BATTLES COMPARED TO FINAL FANTASY?
More strategic, more frequent and time-consuming.

Q. A FINAL FANTASY CONTENDER?
More a 360 tribute to the iconic series and a distraction for *FF* fans prior to *Fabula Nova Crystallis*.



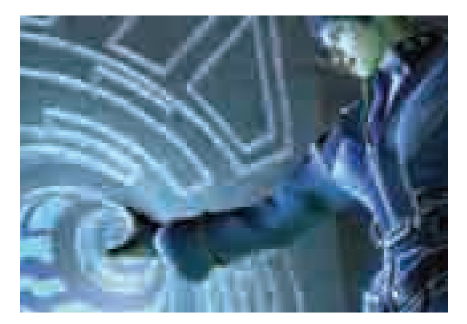




The big blue diamond is a shop… well, obviously.

CHESS ON STEROIDS

There's more to combat in *Enchanted Arms* than a string of single hits. The range of strategies is enhanced by team combo attacks and EX skills, both of which can inflict massive damage upon multiple enemies. These attacks have a limited number of uses and can be activated only once their respective metres have been filled. Combo attacks inflict much more damage than the individual attacks combined, and unused EX attacks can be carried over to subsequent battles. Furthermore, each character is associated with a specific element, and these attacks can be devastating against an opponent of the opposing element.



■ *Enchanted Arms* is littered with cut-scenes for almost every encounter.



■ Many of the bad guys are golems that take different forms, like this Minotaur.

From Software has continued its tradition of solid tactical turn-based battles in *Enchanted Arms*, with chess-inspired simplicity and strategy. Using a pair of 3x4 grids – one for each opposing team – each side takes its turn to queue up and activate its battle actions before ending the turn. Each action has a specific area of effect relative to the position of the character and some attacks affect multiple tiles, allowing the attacker to hit several enemies at once. Naturally, melee combat is usually very limited in range and you cannot move into your opponent's grid, so you need to be sure to complement your team with those whose attacks can target enemies on the far side.

In addition to your prescribed team, there's a vast amount of customisation available to you by creating golems to command in battle. These can be 'synthesised' with the appropriate materials bought at shops and there are around a hundred of these. Despite often being a lesser comrade-in-arms than your human characters, you're encouraged to use them by the employment of vitality points. These dictate the amount of health you can regenerate after each battle, and gradually deplete if you use the same character in many consecutive battles. This can leave you open to a fatal first blow should you enter combat having run out of VP – a clever touch by From Software that rewards careful planning and team management.

Typical fans of RPGs in general are less demanding of original content, usually preferring expansions and variations on proven game features. So maybe there was pressure on From Software from Microsoft to develop an RPG that closely resembled *Final Fantasy* games, in an effort to draw RPG fans over to the 360. We found *Enchanted Arms* well within our comfort zone, but it would have been nice to have been able to step out into the unknown at least once during play.

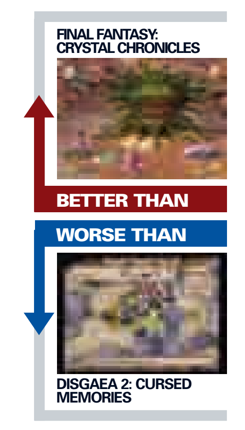
Producer Masanori Takeuchi wanted this game shipped on two disks and it's more than likely that cut-scenes would have made up most of the extra content. A shame, when you consider the potential it had. Unfortunately, Microsoft was focused on establishing the Xbox 360 in the Japanese market as soon as possible, so it wasn't going to budge from a January 2006 release. As it stands, it's only the eye candy that distinguishes *Enchanted Arms* from the raft of tactical RPGs on PS2. And while there's a good deal of RPG satisfaction to be gleaned here, tear-jerking cut-scenes, awesome battle animation and HD lighting alone don't justify a next-generation game.

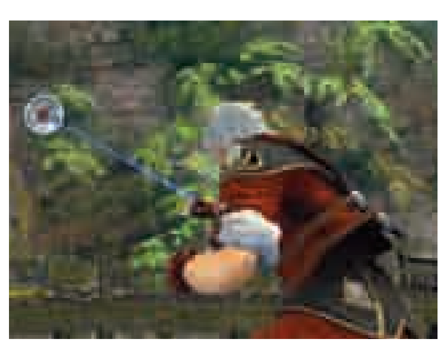
VERDICT 6/10
DIDN'T REACH ITS POTENTIAL

games™ X GENERATION

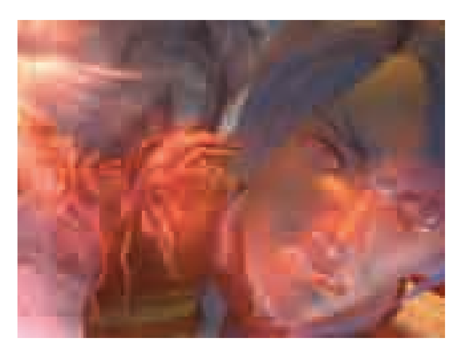
WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GENERATIONS?

CINEMATICS: They're infrequent, but it's worth playing the 50 hours of *Enchanted Arms* for the beautifully rendered cut-scenes that illustrate the story. They'll bring a lump to your throat.





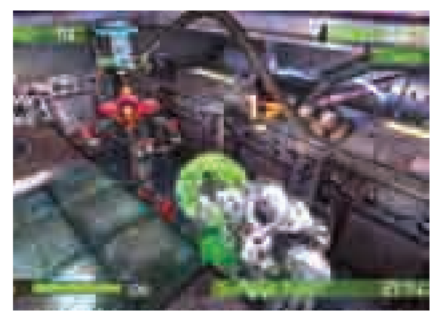
■ Press A to activate, A to attack, A to swim. Er, what button to slingshot?



■ Atsuma hated being named after fruit so his mates nicknamed him Omato.



Yes, the explosions are pretty. But no, this isn't a fit tribute to the wonders of *Bomberman*. Why, Hudson, why?



The idea with single matches in single-player is to remain undefeated for as long as possible. You'll probably quit before you're blown up.



Camera angles such as this add nothing to *Bomberman*. On the contrary, this sort of viewpoint makes play difficult and dull. The humanity.

games™ GLOBAL
TAKING GAMING ONLINE
INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM: The game's redeeming feature is its Live online multi-player. In testing, there were rarely more than a few dozen people online across Japan. That situation should improve after *Zero*'s release in the West.

BOMBERMAN ACT:ZERO

HUDSON RIPS THE HEART OUT OF ITS MOST CELEBRATED CHARACTER

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
Xbox 360
ORIGIN
Japan
PUBLISHER
Hudson
DEVELOPER
In-House
PRICE
¥2,800
RELEASE
Autumn
(Japan/US: Out Now)
PLAYERS
1-8

Gone is the *Bomberman* we know and love. Gone are the kangaroos and dinosaurs. Gone are the boxing gloves. In comes 21st Century *Bomberman*, an ugly *Metroid* clone which clanks about behind an aesthetic nicked from *Robot Wars*. What did we ever do to deserve this?

Boot up *Act:Zero* and an apocalyptic overture plays as it scowls at you with the kind of title screen that could well make full-grown *Bomberman* fans weep. In game, things deteriorate before they (very slightly) improve.

Act:Zero is a budget-friendly release, granted, but we were still surprised to find that when played offline it presented just two game options (both of which are single matches): First-Person Bomber mode, which we'll come to later, and Standard mode, which is almost played from a traditional top-down perspective, albeit removed to a slightly decreased angle – and neither of these can be enjoyed in multi-player offline. Sure, you can play against remote humans online, but there is no traditional multi-player party feature here. And that's unforgivable.

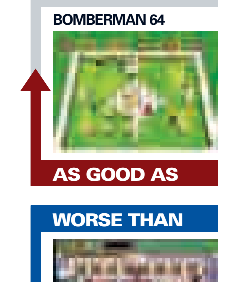
The introduction of Hudson's First-Person Bomber mode is another big mistake. Bizarrely, it actually describes a third-person view of the action, with camera controls. Whereas the gameplay in classic *Bomberman* titles relied on instantaneous movement through tight mazes, which were the perfect width for *Bomberman* sprites to run through, in *Act:Zero* you control a fully animated, human-like form through mazes which are wider than the characters themselves. It just feels slack. The fun which was to be had from dashing about stages is now all but gone, and it has been replaced with the muddy controls of a second-rate homage to *Metal Gear Solid*.

Zero's selection of in-game pick-ups is decent, with remote bombs and power/speed ups to keep the opposition awake, but ultimately the imagination which went into the item design of SNES and PC-engine *Bomberman* games has been disregarded. Also forgotten is the single-player game's Exit Hunt, which used to provide escape to the next level, and so you are left in single-player mode with only battle royal gameplay ad nauseam.

In spite of all these complaints, however, one feature holds some value: multi-player over Xbox Live. This is the only possible reason anyone should consider investing in *Bomberman Act: Zero*. It provides a virtually lag-free experience for up to eight players in any match. And if you look at it really hard, you may be able to catch a glimpse of the rusty heart of our old friend, Bomberman.

VERDICT 3/10
AN UGLY, JOYLESS SHELL OF A BOMBERMAN GAME

BOMBERMAN 64



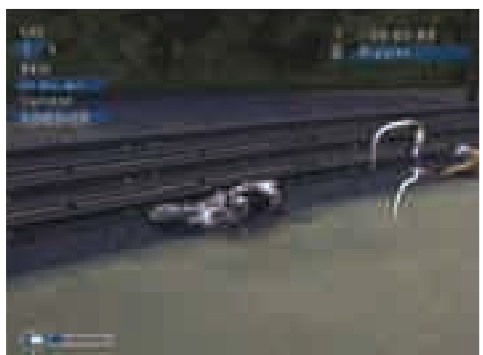
AS GOOD AS

WORSE THAN



SATURN BOMBERMAN







I'm sick of eating bitumen. Just let me ride dammit.



Rider incentives for race completion include extra skill points and equipment.

MISSING LINK

WHATS MISSING FROM THIS TITLE

LEARNING CURVE: I'm sure there's a hill on the horizon, it's just going to take yonks to get there.

SINGLE PLAYABILITY: Enjoy the split-screen multi-player; take on someone as lame as yourself.

SUPER-BIKES: RIDING CHALLENGE

WE MIGHT AS WELL BE RACING THE DAMN BIKES

DETAILS



FORMAT REVIEWED
PlayStation2

OTHER FORMATS
PC

ORIGIN
Italy

PUBLISHER
Black Bean

DEVELOPER
Milestone

PRICE
£29.99

RELEASE
15 September

PLAYERS
2

The disclaimer states, "Don't imitate the riding and movements in real life". Presumably this is because if you were really riding this way you would fall off and chances are you'd experience a similar level of excruciating frustration to what we felt when playing Milestone's *Super-Bikes: Riding Challenge*. Milestone has prided its *Super-Bikes* titles on realism and attention to detail – and therein lies the problem with this one.

As opposed to other motorcycle games, such as Polyphony Digital's recent *Tourist Trophy*, Milestone's latest offering has an intense focus on rider control and ability. PS2's left analogue stick controls the stance of the rider, so pushing the thumbstick hard left or right will lean him hard into a corner, while up or down assists acceleration and deceleration. This certainly lends the game a motorbike-racing experience that's far closer to the real deal.

You begin with seven vital statistics that you can improve by distributing points gained through acquiring experience in races and levelling up. Helmets, gloves and other kit can further improve these stats. It's a clever incentive system – more commonly found in RPGs – that rewards you with rider improvements appropriate to your race performance.

Unfortunately, while the controls are simple and the premise is familiar, the game itself is horrifically unforgiving. From the outset, we had severe difficulties taking corners without braking to a crawl, hitting any surface other than the tarmac inevitably resulted in a complete wipe-out and we rarely saw the back of the pack after the first lap. Think you can outpace the competition with the beefy 900cc Ducati Monster? Forget it, more power simply means more spectacular nosedives and the lesser bikes on offer at the start will have you eating your opponents' dust from the green light.

Having been hopelessly outclassed in the tournaments, we turned to Challenge mode: a series of mini-games that allow you to practice manoeuvres and improve the stats of your rider upon completion. Surely here we would find some respite in achieving something, and notch our man's abilities up a mark or two, giving us a chance in the main races? But no, even the Easy mode challenges are nigh on impossible.

It's a shame because we can see a decent racing game under the merciless difficulty setting. Most people aren't professional motorcyclists and, regardless of its authenticity, this is a game and we like the buffer of unreality that allows us to enjoy racing bikes professionally without the years of trial, error and frustration.

VERDICT 5/10

GREAT AUTHENTICITY, HORRENDOUS PLAYABILITY

AUTO MODELLISTA



AS GOOD AS

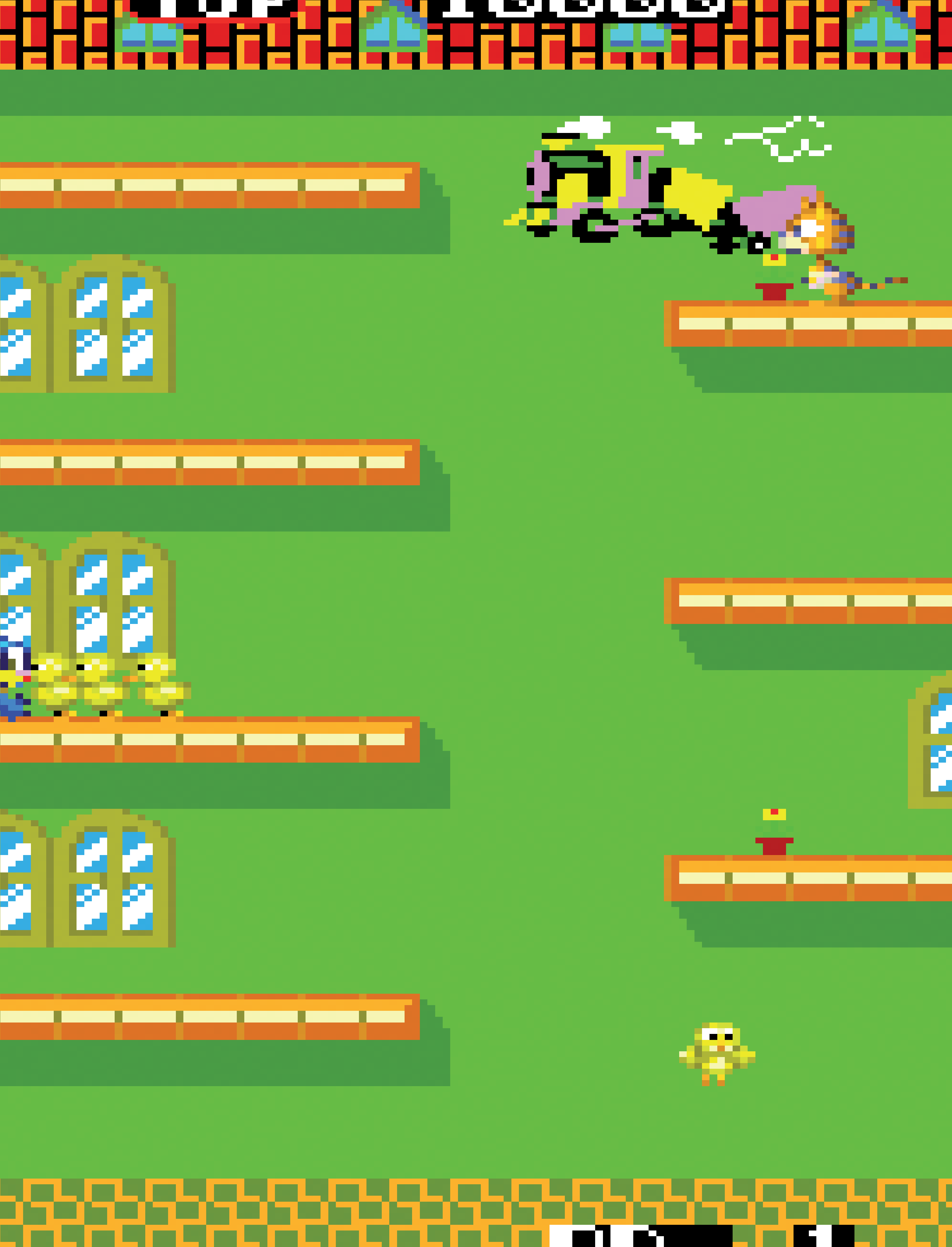
WORSE THAN



GRAN TURISMO 4



A classic game of cat and… bird **Flicky, Arcade [Sega] 1984**




eMag



AN IMAGINE PUBLICATION
NO.48 SEPTEMBER 2006
00p

GET YOUR VIRTUAL ON

A LOOK AT THE CLASSIC SATURN GAME

DIE HARD ARCADE

Sega Ages Dynamite Deka Reviewed

PLUS

RETRO NEWS, GAMES THAT TIME FORGOT, CLASH OF THE TITANS, RETRO CONTACT, WORST LICENCE EVER AND MORE…

BEHIND THE SCENES OF WETRIX

The Pickford Brothers Speak

GREATEST GAME EVER

The Mind-Blowing Space Harrier

BUYERS' GUIDE

RETRO GEAR

Your complete guide to the classic consoles and illustrious software

RETRO NEWS

Find out what's going on in the here and now of retro gaming

After several months in the wilderness, games™ finally has someone to regularly manage the retro section of your favourite magazine, and that someone is me. Don't worry though, because although I'd love to fill all 24 pages of Retro with coverage of *Shining Force* (the best game ever made), the section will stay as well balanced as it always has. We're well aware that we won't be able to please all of the people all of the time, but that won't stop us from trying. And this is why you'll find features that cover both classic consoles and computers as well as arcade hits and vintage imports. We've also taken notice of your requests and resurrected the Clash Of The Titans feature that many of you have asked for.

If you'd like to see any other Retro features in the mag or feel that your favourite machine or game hasn't been covered sufficiently then drop us a line at the email address below and we'll see if we can't sort something out for you. Don't forget that we are also interested in your response to last month's Spectrum Special. If you'd like to see similar retro features in the future or if you really hate the idea then don't hesitate to let us know…

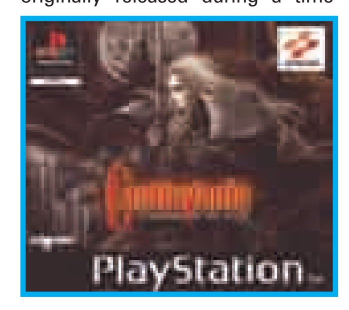
So what are you waiting for? Check out what Retro has in store for you this month.

Ashley Day
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LANDMARK PSONE GAME RUMOURED TO BE DUE ON LIVE ARCADE

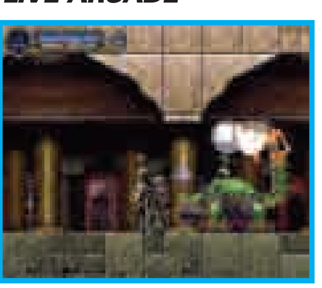
CASTLEVANIA DOES A 360

Ask any *Castlevania* fan which their favourite entry in the series is and there's a good chance that they'll pick the 1997 PlayStation masterpiece, *Symphony Of The Night*. Sadly, the game was originally released during a time when the world was obsessed with the latest 3D games and, being a strictly 2D video game, *Symphony Of The Night* sold relatively poorly and is now very difficult to find.



Good news for those who can't afford the mammoth eBay prices then, as it looks as though the game could be heading for Xbox Live Arcade in the near future. American games magazine *Electronic Gaming Monthly* has reported that, along with its line up of classic arcade games, Konami will be bringing *Symphony Of The Night* to Live Arcade during the first quarter of 2007.

With such a huge game heading for Microsoft's service, Nintendo and Sony will have to come up with something special if their downloadable games are to compete with Xbox Live Arcade. Nintendo should be fairly safe with its exclusive and extensive back catalogue, but Sony should be pretty worried by now. We wouldn't be surprised if the Japanese giant doesn't announce some triple-A online games very soon.



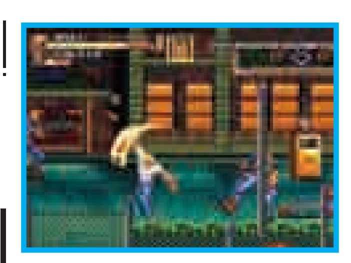
▲ Despite the advance of 3D gaming *Symphony Of The Night* flew the flag for two dimensions.

MEGA DRIVE COLLECTION

AMERICAN GENESIS COMPILATION HEADING FOR PSP AND PS2

Shortly before the publication of our last issue, **games™** Retro learned of Sega's plans to release a compilation of Mega Drive games for both PSP and PS2. Due for North American release in November, the collection is currently unconfirmed for a European release. Early word suggests that the package will contain around 28 full Mega Drive games including *Shinobi 2*, the *Golden Axe* trilogy, *Phantasy Star*, *Ecco The Dolphin*, *Sonic* and *Virtua Fighter II*.

While the inclusion of ropey arcade conversions like *Virtua Fighter II* make us a little uneasy, we're actually pretty excited about the *Genesis Collection*. If Sega adds some of the better Mega Drive-exclusive titles, like the *Streets Of Rage* trilogy and at least one of the *Shining Force* games, then this should be yet another fantastic compilation for Sony's handheld.



We'll be tracking any news on *Sega Genesis Collection* very carefully so as soon as we hear of any more confirmed games or a European release you'll read about here.



GTW64 EXPANDS

GAMES THAT WEREN'T NEEDS YOU

Seasoned readers may remember that back in issue 25 we interviewed Frank Gasking about his rather excellent Games That Weren't 64 website. With over 700 unreleased Commodore 64 games on the site, it was only a matter of time before Frank began to focus on other formats, and this month he's launched a new portal to do just that.

www.gamesthatwerent.com has been established as a holding site for several format-specific sites dedicated to unreleased games. The portal currently houses GTW websites for Amiga, Commodore 64 and PC, but Gasking is looking for more people to set up their own sites and join the Games That Weren't community.

"We're hoping to build up a large community of support, which will help us build and share knowledge and information to find titles", said Gasking of the new site. So, if you have a passion for unreleased games on a particular format and would like to get involved then point your browser at www.gamesthatwerent.com and get in touch with the team.

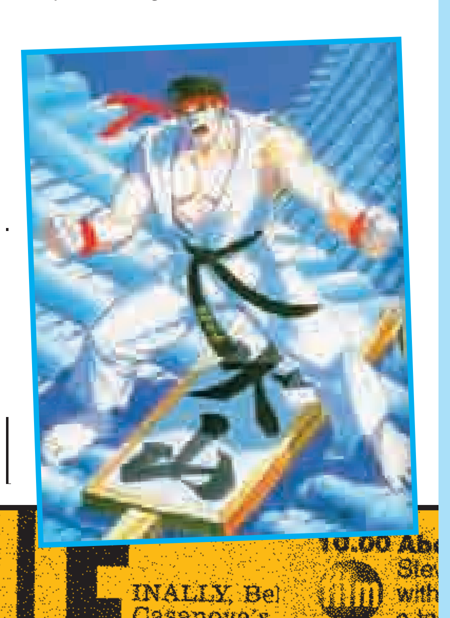


STREET FIGHTER II STILL NUMBER ONE

FIFTEEN YEARS OLD AND STILL GOING STRONG...

Following its Live Arcade debut on 2 August, *Street Fighter II* has become the fastest selling Xbox Live Arcade game to date. Within minutes of going online, the game had spurred hundreds of Xbox 360 owners to stump up 800 GamerPoints for what has to be one of the most anticipated games of 2006 – even though it can be played on nearly every other console and computer in existence. If that isn't a sign of retro gaming's overwhelming popularity then we don't know what is.

"We are elated by the tremendous response Xbox Live users have given *Street Fighter II: Hyper Fighting* as players around the world vie to be on top of the game's numerous leaderboards," said Charles Bellfield, Capcom's vice president of marketing, in a press release, "It'll be exciting to see who ranks number one on Xbox Live Arcade after the first weekend of gamers playing the greatest arcade title in history." The "greatest arcade title in history"? That's a bold claim but not one that's easy to disagree with when so many people are still buying and playing the game. We prefer *Street Fighter III* so come on, Capcom, let's get that online too.



Retro DIARY

Old-school gaming is on the up, so games™ dedicates itself to keeping you up to date with what's going down in the world of retro...

SEPTEMBER '06

Ultimate Ghosts 'N Goblins

Date: 8 September **Publisher:** Capcom **Price:** £34.99 **Format:** PSP

If you're reading this on the day the mag goes on sale then you should be very excited because *Ultimate Ghosts 'N Goblins* is out tomorrow. If you're reading on any other day then what are you waiting for? Go buy it, quick.

Mega Man ZX

Date: 12 September **Publisher:** Capcom **Price:** $29.99 **Format:** DS

Capcom strikes again with yet another modern update of a classic franchise. Out in the US this month (with a UK release still unconfirmed) *Mega Man ZX* is set to reinvent the ageing formula by including six playable characters and a single, explorable level as seen in the likes of *Super Metroid* and *Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night*. We're looking forward to this one.

Gradius Collection

Date: 29 September **Publisher:** Konami **Price:** £34.99 **Format:** PSP

PSP really is the format of choice for retro heads, this month. Not only will we get our grubby hands on the amazing *Ghosts 'N Goblins* but also Konami will finally be releasing *Gradius Collection* in the UK. With five *Gradius* titles, including the previously unreleased in the UK; *Gradius Gaiden*, this is an essential package for shoot-'em-up fans.

Retro Fusion: Weekend Of Gaming

Date: 30 Sept-1 Oct **Venue:** Kenilworth, Warwickshire **Price:** £15

Following a shaky period of uncertainty, the Weekend Of Gaming (previously known as the Retro Ball) is back on. Visitors can expect to meet retro celebs like The Oliver Twins, Archer Maclean, Jon Hare, Oli and Franco Frey, Roger Kean and Mathew Uffindell as well as our sister publication *Retro Gamer*. Not to be missed.

OCTOBER '06

Taito Legends Power Up

Date: 6 October **Publisher:** Xplosiv **Price:** £19.99 **Format:** PSP

What? No *Zoo Keeper*! No *Elevator Action Returns*! Deep breaths, deep breaths… it's not all bad news after all. At least the PSP version of *Taito Legends* has the sublime *New Zealand Story* as well as a raft of other classic Taito arcade games. If we can enjoy a good game of *Rainbow Islands Extra* on the bus then we will quite happily play *Taito Legends Power Up*… as long as *Zoo Keeper* is in the sequel.

Power Stone Collection

Date: 13 October **Publisher:** Capcom **Price:** £34.99 **Format:** PSP

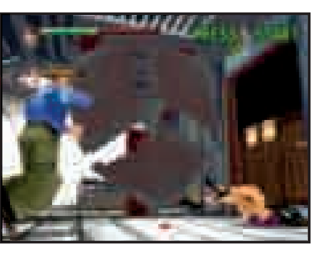
Capcom, with these retro collections you're really spoiling us. The original *Power Stone* was a must-have Dreamcast title – and one of the most under-rated 3D fighters of all time – so we're ecstatic to see it get a second chance along with the sequel on PSP. If Capcom can get the Wi-Fi multi-player working this will be another essential re-release for PSP.



SEGA AGES VOL 26:



DYNAMITE DEKA


The enhanced Dynamite Deka mode in action…


…and the same scene in Saturn mode.

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Sega **Developer:** In-House
Release: Japan: Out Now
Price: ¥2,500
Content: Dynamite Deka mode, Sega Saturn mode, Easy mode, One-Shot Kill mode, Arrest mode, Deadline mode, Altered Beast mode, Periscope

YIPPEE-KI-YAY MUDDY FUNSTER!

If we had a section for the Best Licence Ever, *Dynamite Deka* (aka *Die Hard Arcade*) would definitely be in there. Although it was only loosely based on the classic Bruce Willis action vehicle, *Dynamite Deka* successfully captured the violence and humour that made the movie so much fun. The original 1996 coin-op and subsequent Saturn version allowed two players to duke their way through several levels, stringing together a fantastic array of moves (from only three buttons) in what is still one of the best 3D scrolling fighters of all time.

This Tenth Anniversary edition for PS2 includes a graphically enhanced version of the original S-TV arcade game, a perfect port of the Sega Saturn conversion and a number of exclusive modes that tinker with the formula to add extra challenge and longevity. Most players will gravitate towards Dynamite Deka mode – the enhanced arcade version – as this is where the bulk of the package lies. Sega has done a fantastic job with the conversion. It plays just as we remember, with no glitches or slowdown, and looks significantly better than the original. Polygon counts are higher, the lighting adds atmosphere and the facial animation in the cut-scenes is a massive improvement. It's a shame that Sega didn't include an arcade-perfect version for historical accuracy, but we can't really complain when Dynamite Deka looks and plays this well.

Sega Saturn mode offers a perfect port of the Sega Saturn release from 1997. Purists who no longer own the original disc will get a kick out of this as the graphics are identical right down to the choppy animation and extensive clipping. This is bound to provide a nostalgia blast for old Saturn fans although we suspect that anyone else will skip it in favour of the prettier Deka mode. But that's their loss.

Rounding off the package is a wealth of extras that put almost every other *Sega Ages* release to shame. There are four unlockable modes that alter the gameplay in some way. One-Shot Kill mode is the fairly self-explanatory Hard option. Arrest mode requires you to apprehend and handcuff each enemy before moving to the next stage, which requires the use of handgun weapons and a combination of moves to achieve. Deadline mode is a simple Time Attack option while Altered Beast mode – definitely the best of the bunch – puts you in control of the werewolf from the 2005 PS2 game and constantly decreases your health bar only allowing you to refill it by collecting the orbs that fallen enemies drop. Each extra mode also includes various secret weapons and new costumes, including characters from previous Sega games like *Golden Axe* and Japanese Saturn mascot *Segata Sanshiro*, and even famous faces from the real world, like Elvis Presley.

Fans of the Sega Saturn version of *Die Hard Arcade* may remember that extra credits could be gained by playing an emulated version of a 1979 Sega game called *Deep Scan*. The *Sega Ages* release also features a similar option, but replaces *Deep Scan* with a simulation of Sega's mechanical coin-op game *Periscope*. Hailing from the Sixties, *Periscope* is an unknown relic from Sega's ancient past that has been meticulously recreated in 3D to be both played and investigated with a virtual camera. It's great to see such curiosities recreated for posterity and it's great to see Sega putting in the extra effort for these collections.

We would have liked an arcade-perfect port on the disc as well as the 1998 sequel *Dynamite Cop*, but there's no faulting the excellent package that Sega has put together. Anyone who fondly remembers playing *Die Hard Arcade* with a mate in the arcade or on Saturn should lap up this excellent package.

Ax Battler is just one of many familiar characters to make an appearance.

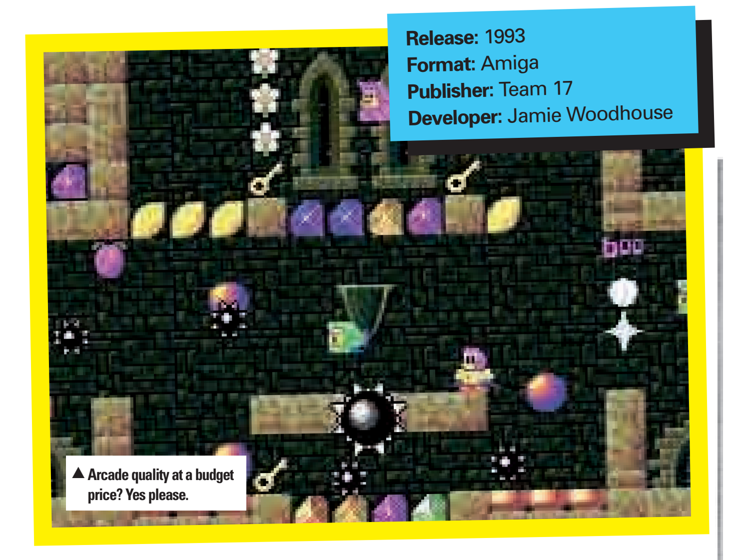


OVERALL SCORE 91%

GAMES THAT TIME FORGOT

WE ATTEMPT TO REWRITE THE HISTORY BOOKS BY SALUTING THOSE CLASSIC GAMES THAT HAVE FALLEN BY THE WAYSIDE





Release: 1993
Format: Amiga
Publisher: Team 17
Developer: Jamie Woodhouse

▲ Arcade quality at a budget price? Yes please.

QWAK

FROM THE MAKER OF WORMS…

Classic Amiga developer Team 17 is best known for its well loved *Worms* franchise but it also has a few relatively lesser known gems that deserve a mention. One such hidden treasure is *Qwak*, a single-screen platform game that failed to make an impact because its budget price belied the excellent quality within. This Amiga classic was initially developed by freelance coder Jamie Woodhouse before Team 17 realised just how addictive the game could be. The *Worms* team then snapped up the publishing rights and helped Jamie to polish off the production.

Although *Qwak* is nothing more than a traditional arcade-style platform game, it deserves recognition because its play mechanics are tuned to perfection. Collecting fruit and avoiding enemies shouldn't be that compelling, but the expertly designed levels, tight controls and strict time limit make it a challenging game with real 'one more go' appeal.

Little touches, like the suit of armour to protect the duck character and the spiky balls that drop from the sky when the time runs out, add extra charm to the game and help it to stand out from all the other *Bubble Bobble* clones out there. Arcade quality and unique charm make *Qwak* an essential Amiga game that should have received much more attention than it did.

WORST LICENCE EVER

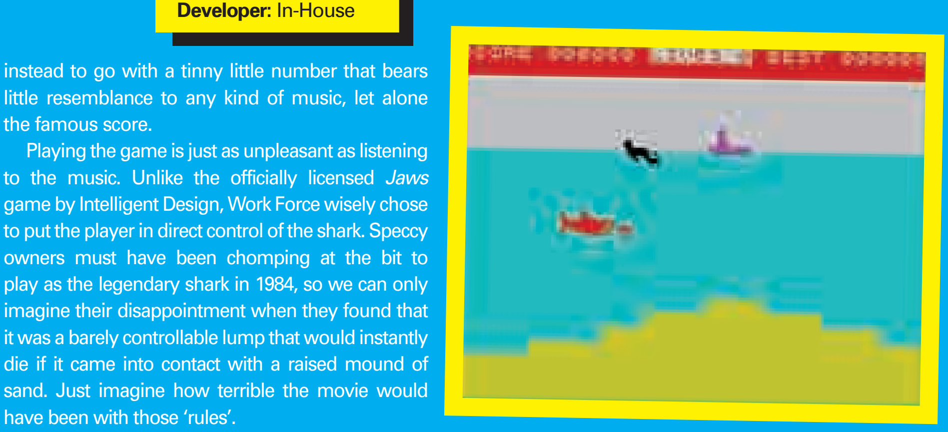
JAWS REVENGE

THIS GAME BITES

Release: 1983
Format: ZX Spectrum
Publisher: Work Force
Developer: In-House

Thought *Jaws Unleashed* was the first game to ruin the great reputation of Steven Spielberg's new Hollywood masterpiece? Well there have actually been many sharp-toothed stinkers over the years, but none worse than Work Force's unlicensed Spectrum title, *Jaws Revenge*. Spookily, the game pre-empted the movie release of *Jaws: The Revenge* by four years. So we're spared the horror of colour-clash renditions of Michael Caine and Mario Van Peebles, but as an unlicensed game *Jaws Revenge* also omits John Williams' spine-tingling signature tune. Work Force didn't even try to rip off the tune in a way that wouldn't get them into trouble, choosing instead to go with a tinny little number that bears little resemblance to any kind of music, let alone the famous score.

Playing the game is just as unpleasant as listening to the music. Unlike the officially licensed *Jaws* game by Intelligent Design, Work Force wisely chose to put the player in direct control of the shark. Speccy owners must have been chomping at the bit to play as the legendary shark in 1984, so we can only imagine their disappointment when they found that it was a barely controllable lump that would instantly die if it came into contact with a raised mound of sand. Just imagine how terrible the movie would have been with those 'rules'.



▲ Can't swim over an incline? You'll identify with *Jaws Revenge*.



PUT A ROBOT IN YOUR VIDEOGAME AND YOU'LL AUTOMATICALLY REGISTER A FEW PINGS ON RETRO'S INTEREST-O-METER. ADD ONE OF THE STRANGEST YET ULTIMATELY BRILLIANT CUSTOM CONTROLLERS, AND THAT METER IS LIKELY TO EXPLODE IN A SHOWER OF IMMEASURABLE JOY. SEGA'S VIRTUAL ON MANAGED JUST THAT WHEN IT DEBUTED BACK IN 1995, SO JOIN US AS WE PAY TRIBUTE TO ONE OF THE GREATEST MECH GAMES OF ALL TIME…

VIRTUAL



Way back in its golden era, Sega was notorious for "bringing the arcade experience home". From its earliest console and computer games to the 'death' of the Dreamcast in 2001, its core purpose was to deliver as close an approximation to the original arcade game as possible. While console technology didn't always allow for accurate recreations of the graphics and sound, Sega usually managed to replicate the feel of an arcade game by releasing special peripherals. Ranging from the generic, such as arcade sticks and light guns, to the more exotic, like *Samba De Amigo's* maraca controllers each accessory was always durably built and crucial to making the gameplay experience as fun as on the large coin-op machines. With its rich history of arcade conversions, Sega has produced plenty of custom peripherals worthy of recognition, but it is the *Virtual On* Twin Stick that holds a particularly special place in our hearts.

The arcade version of *Virtual On* was developed in 1995 by Sega's AM3 arcade division, which later became Hitmaker before being dissolved back into Sega in 2004. The coin-op, running on the Model 2 hardware, initially appealed to Japanese gamers because of its ten familiar mech characters. Known as Virtuaroids, the sleek and agile giant robots were designed by Japan's most famous mech designer Hajime Katoki, who was responsible for almost all of the *Gundam* anime designs of the late Eighties and early Nineties as well as the robots of the incredibly popular *Super Robot Wars* videogame series. Mech 'characters' like Temjin and Raiden drew from over 15 years of *Gundam* designs to exploit the massive popularity of the genre among the Japanese youth that had been starved of high-quality robot combat games before *Virtual On*.

If Katoki's stylised mech designs reeled gamers toward the *Virtual On* cabinets it was the dual-stick control system – which sought to



▲ Australian *VO* player competes in the Virtual Century 2000 tournament in Sega World, Sydney.

KICK VIRTUAL ASS

HERE AT RETRO we can talk about the history of *Virtual On* until the cows come home, but when it comes to offering in-depth play strategies we'd rather let the experts have their say. That's why we tracked down two hardcore *Virtual On* players to talk about their preferred method of robo-combat…

"My current main VR is Apharmd," recalls David Li of Alabama, USA "His armour, power and, most importantly, speed allow him to mow down almost anything save for a steady Raiden." Which leads us on to James, Webmaster of virtualon.net and a founding member of the Sydney Virtual On Club. "Without a doubt, Raiden is my favourite. Known for having the most powerful attack in the game, his laser could decimate a careless opponent in a fraction of a second. Of course, he was also known as the slowest VR, but, in the hands of an expert, he was able to show surprising agility. His melee attacks were considered useless until I discovered his underused shoulder ram was actually the fastest close-combat attack in the game. This turned the tables on the traditional close-combat characters."

simulate the feel of piloting a giant robot – that kept them hooked on the game for years to come. Each cabinet featured two sticks and four Fire buttons used in conjunction to control a 'mech' in a one-on-one arena battle. With fights that required fast movement and swift reactions, mastery of the controls was essential and new players soon got their steel backsides handed to them if they didn't know the basics of *Virtual On*'s manoeuvres. Both sticks had to be pushed in the same way in order to move in a chosen direction – and while pushing one forward and the other back would turn the mech on the spot, pulling the sticks away from each other would force the mech to jump hundreds of feet into the air. Pushing the sticks together would make them block attacks. Though the controls could initially seem overwhelming, once these basic instructions were understood it became a simple matter of building on the commands and inventing strategies to out-duel any opponent.

Since *Virtual On* cabinets could be linked together for two-player battles, it played like a 3D brawler and is best thought of as a competitive game since each mech featured its own strengths and weaknesses that needed to be considered in order to progress to the final boss. As such, communities of *VO* players soon built up in Japan – where the game is still played at tournament level – and dedicated players began shaping and sharing their combat strategies on the Internet. In comparison to its Japanese reception, *Virtual On* failed to take off in the UK. The unfamiliar controls were seen as a barrier by many of the British players who got to try out the machines, while the anime-inspired designs had little impact on a public who wouldn't see *Gundam* on their television screens for at least another five years. As such, the innovative fighter only managed to gain acceptance among the most hardcore Sega fans and anime lovers. Following a lacklustre reception from Joe Public, the arcade machine received only a limited distribution, although it did find a foothold in the bigger arcades across the country, where a greater number of more informed gamers played.



▲ Tenjin is the 'Ryu' of *Virtual On*: a good all rounder that everyone likes to use.

joypad but felt incredibly clumsy, especially to newcomers, and lost half of what made the arcade version interesting to begin with. As always, Japanese gamers were treated to the full meal deal as Sega produced enough Twin Stick controllers for everyone. With a Japanese copy of the game (running in 60Hz as nature intended) and one or two pairs of Twin Sticks, the game truly came to life. Being able to play the game in the comfort of the home meant that players could practice for the viciously competitive arcade battles cheaply and conveniently.

The arcade version was, in typical Sega fashion, graphically better than everything before it, eclipsing even the gorgeous looks of *Virtua Fighter 2*. Saturn, built around 2D architecture as it was, could never hope for an arcade-perfect port, but the conversion team at Sega certainly made a port to be proud of. The major difference was that the Saturn version had to be tuned down to a low resolution and 30fps in order to keep the essential speed as high as the arcade version. Concessions obviously had to be made to convert the title but, as a Saturn game in its own right, *Virtual On* had some impressive tricks up its sleeve. Several explosions featured difficult-to-achieve transparency effects and the two-player split-screen mode still ran at the full 30fps.

Any presentational differences were largely irrelevant as the gameplay and controls were a



Despite its scattered UK fan base, *Virtual On* developed a strong worldwide community and soon became a firm favourite at local meets and tournaments. So when news of a console version spread, it set the hearts of certain Sega fanboys aflutter. When the Saturn port arrived in Europe, however, it brought with it a wave of disappointment as eager *Virtual On* players found that the much-anticipated controller wouldn't make it to our shores. The game could of course be controlled with Saturn's

hundred per cent accurate thanks to Sega's superb controller. Anyone who has sampled the delights of the sublime Saturn Arcade Stick (the Japanese one, not the horrible European thing) will know that when it comes to custom controllers, Sega builds them strong, tough and durable so that they can withstand the sort of pounding that they'd receive in a public arcade, and the Twin Stick controller is no exception. Its build quality is second to none; made from a combination of metal and plastic parts it feels solid and resistant without restricting movement. Despite its durable design,

the controller feels quite light and can be played in the lap as well as on a flat surface. In terms of design, the controller looks very classy. The unit is white to match the redesigned Japanese Saturn, and is decorated to resemble the panel art of the coin-op. Overall, the peripheral screams quality in both looks and usability; it is a first-class Sega product that deserves to be the centrepiece of anyone's Saturn collection.

Like many other custom controllers, the Twin Stick was an expensive purchase back in 1995, and the price has steadily risen as the device has increased in rarity. At the time of writing we could find only one set of sticks on eBay for the princely sum of £80 including postage. That's a lot of money for a controller, so interested buyers really have to love *Virtual On* to be able to put up the cash.

Thankfully, there are a handful of relatively undocumented games that also work with the sticks so, if you can track them down, they'll add value to the purchase. *Mobile Suit Gundam Side Story 2*, for example, appeared shortly after the release of *Virtual On* and officially made use of the Twin Stick. Unlike the Sega game, *Gundam* is a single-player-only experience with missions and objectives rather than arena battles. The game controls similarly to *Virtual On* (with lock-on and dodge commands added) but pits the player against multiple opponents as well as tanks and other non-robot enemies. As *Virtual On* is intended to be a multi-player game at heart, *Gundam Side Story 2* offers a more complete solo experience and is a welcome distraction from the main event. The imaginatively titled sequel *Gundam Side Story 3* appeared a year later and, unless you count the release of *Virtual On* for Seganet (an online version of the game), it is the last of only three games to officially make use of the Twin Stick. There are, however, several games that can be modified to use the controller.



▲ Every Virtuaroid has a working Saturn on its back or a Dreamcast in the sequel.

Just about any game with configurable controls could be set up to use the Twin Stick unit although there are only a few titles where their use would be appropriate. We wouldn't recommend you play *Street Fighter* with them, for example. Other giant robot games are probably the best to make use of the sticks and, let's face it, if you're willing to spend £80 just to play *Virtual On* then it's a safe bet that you're into your towering mechanical monsters. Game Arts' *Gungriffon* (and its Japan-only sequel) is a good place to start. Switch the control option to Type B and this *Steel Battalion*-esque sim will work a treat with the sticks. The game is a lot less arcadey than *Virtual On* and *Gundam*, so the controls aren't quite as intuitive, but once you get used to them it becomes a very enjoyable simulation. As in *Gundam Side Story*, the mech is controlled from a first-person perspective to create an immersive feel. The left stick controls the looking direction while the right stick accelerates and decelerates the mech. With such wildly different controls to its peers, *Gungriffon* feels more realistic (for want of a better word) as it creates the illusion of actually operating a huge machine rather than being in direct control of it – think of it as the difference between driving a car and actually being a car.

The *Gungriffon* and *Gundam* games can all be picked up for less than a tenner these days, so if you already own the Twin Sticks, they're a quick and easy way to expand the use of the peripheral. It's also worth experimenting with your existing collection of games since you never know what will work well with the sticks. One of Retro's secret informants tells us, for example, that TechnoSoft's *Hyper Reverthion* and *Steeldom* are both compatible, although the elusiveness of these import-only games means that we've so far been unable to confirm the fact.

Regardless of whether you sample any of the other games, the original *Virtual On* should be reason enough to pick up the game and a set of sticks. As home conversions of classic arcade games go, it is among the best. With its fast, intense gameplay and one of the greatest custom controllers of all time, *Virtual On* stands proud as a unique experience and is a monument to Sega's remarkable dedication to its home users. If you absolutely need to have the best arcade games in the comfort of your own home then *Virtual On* and its controller are quite simply essential.

Thank you to the Video Game Centre for kindly supplying Gungriffon. For all your Saturn needs visit www.videogamecentre.co.uk

"IF YOU ABSOLUTELY NEED TO HAVE THE BEST ARCADE GAMES THEN VIRTUAL ON AND ITS CONTROLLER ARE QUITE SIMPLY ESSENTIAL"

WHAT EXACTLY IS A TANGRAM?

WHILE IT'S BLATANTLY obvious that we have a soft spot for the original *Virtual On* and its Saturn conversion, the consensus among the *VO* fan community is that the arcade and Dreamcast sequel, *Virtual On: Oratorio Tangram*, is the superior game. "*Oratorio Tangram* is one of the reasons I own a Dreamcast at all. If I had to pick one *Virtual On* game to own, this would be it," claims *Virtual On* community member, David Li.

Like the Saturn game, the Dreamcast version of *Virtual On* came with its own excellent quality Twin Sticks – which were produced in extremely small quantities – and, thanks to the console's raw power, managed to match the visuals of the arcade version easily. The one feature that really sets *Oratorio Tangram* apart from its predecessor, however, is its ability to link to another Dreamcast for multi-player matches using two machines and two TV sets for the full arcade experience.



CLASH OF THE TITANS

RICK DANGEROUS

As gaming infiltrated the home market, a new breed of gamer evolved. Dubbed the 'fanboy', he associated himself with a certain genre, machine or even developer or publisher, and then ridiculed all that opposed him. First recorded in playgrounds in the early Eighties, typical arguments revolved around who had the better machine, or which game looked best on which format. We aim to put a stop to years of squabbling by finding the definitive versions of some classic titles. This month it's the 8-bit computer versions of Core Design's *Indiana Jones*-inspired *Rick Dangerous*.

ROUND 1: VISUALS

COMMODORE 64: While it's not exactly identical to the 16-bit Amiga and ST versions, C64's *Rick Dangerous* looks awfully similar. The sprites are very identifiable and they easily beat the messy Amstrad and monochrome Spectrum characters. Rick even jumps right up to the screen, increasing in size as he dies.

SPECTRUM: It's unsurprising to see the Speccy churning out yet more monochrome graphics with dirty colour clash, but we have to admit that the sprites and levels are very clean. The sprites retain the same cartoon feel as the C64 version and you never find yourself wondering what something is meant to be.

AMSTRAD: What might not be obvious from the screenshot is that when the Amstrad version of *Rick Dangerous* is in motion there is a great depth-of-field effect. Sadly, the garish colours, messy sprites and the fact that Rick falls *behind* the background when he dies, let the Amstrad side down.

WINNER: COMMODORE 64
RUNNER UP: SPECTRUM

ROUND 2: AUDIO

COMMODORE 64: We absolutely love *Rick Dangerous'* silent cinema-inspired soundtrack so it warms our heart to hear C64's SID chip play out the infamous tune in its entirety. Although the overall sound can become a little cluttered because of the number of channels in use, the C64 version simply sounds awesome.

SPECTRUM: Wow. Not only does Spectrum manage to knock out an impressive rendition of the game's theme tune – all the way to the end of the first screen, as it should – but it also finds a way to play the sound effects at the same time. Even the Commodore 64 version doesn't do that. Good old Speccy.

AMSTRAD: Unlike the other versions, Amstrad's edition somehow manages to produce a few stereo sound effects – most notably in Rick's footsteps. The soundtrack, however, is completely missing. This music is too good to miss so we sadly have to put a black mark against the Amstrad version for this.

WINNER: COMMODORE 64
RUNNER UP: SPECTRUM

ROUND 3: GAMEPLAY

COMMODORE 64: There's just no stopping the mighty Commodore 64 this month as its gameplay equally matches the high standard of both its graphics and sound. Everything just works entirely as it should making this excellent platform game as joyous as it was intended.

SPECTRUM: The Spectrum's rubber keys and Kempston joysticks are both quite responsive in *Rick Dangerous*, and the game plays terrifically on the underpowered hardware. The screen does flicker when there's a lot going on, but it rarely affects the gameplay at all.

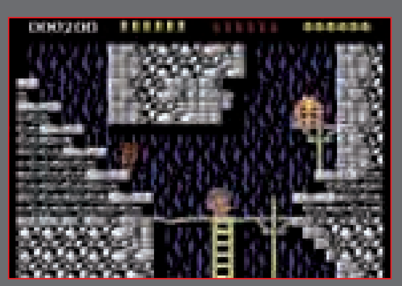
AMSTRAD: Although the Amstrad version of *Rick Dangerous* features some adequately responsive controls and relatively smooth scrolling, it's somewhat let down by the fact that Rick Dangerous himself feels slightly sluggish at times and even appears to float through jumps which results, more often than not, in his imminent death as mistimed jumps bring him into contact with a nasty spear.

WINNER: COMMODORE 64
RUNNER UP: SPECTRUM

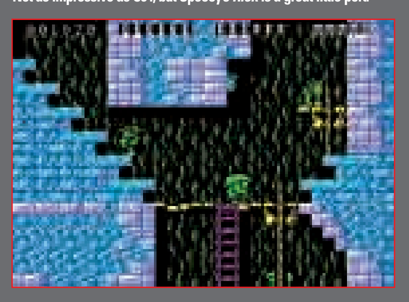
AND THE WINNER IS...

COMMODORE 64

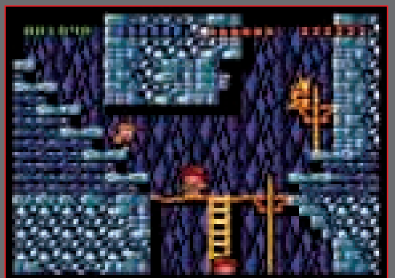
It's been a closely fought battle with every contender putting up a strong fight. Each game played well in its own right, but C64's triumph is our deserved winner simply for excelling in all areas. Commodore 64's *Rick Dangerous* is that bit better than its competitors in terms of gameplay, sound and graphics. Who needs Amiga?



Not as impressive as C64, but Speccy's *Rick* is a great little port.

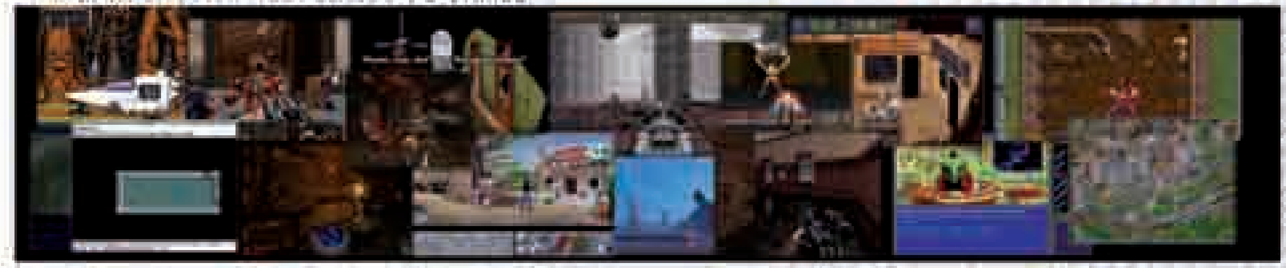


With garish colours and a lack of music, Amstrad's is the worst.

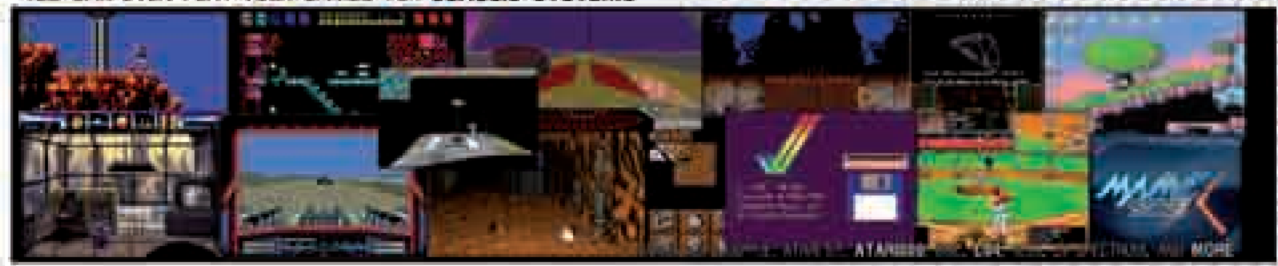


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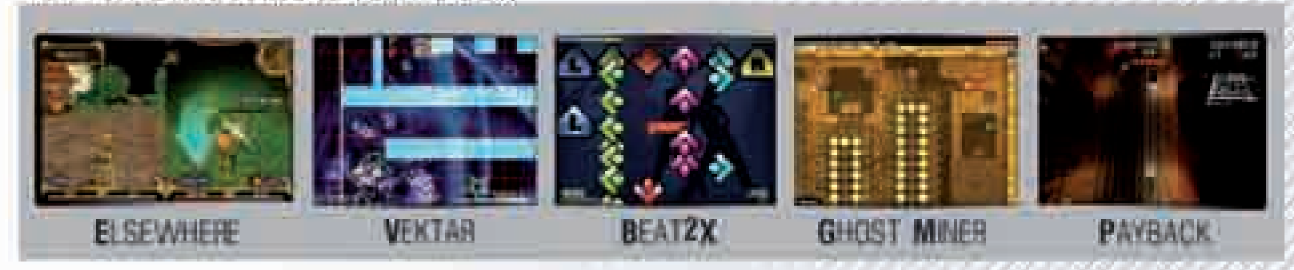
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Greatest RETRO Game Ever

SPACE HARRIER

Retro heads off to the Fantasy Zone to do battle with some of the most bizarre beasties ever to appear in a videogame

WELCOME TO BONUS STAGE

***Space Harrier's* bonus stage is memorable because instead of killing Fantasy Zone's dragons, you get to team up with one. Looking like a cross between a cat and the luck dragon from *The NeverEnding Story*, you jump onto the hairy creature's back and start racking up points by smashing into as many ground objects as possible. After deftly dodging every obstacle that flew toward you in the previous stages, being able to gleefully smash your way through every on-screen object is immensely satisfying and is only matched by the massive bonus score that your rampage of destruction has just caused. Marvellous.**

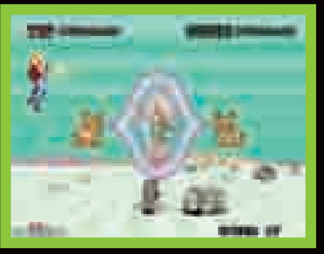


▲ The game's humour and appeal remains.

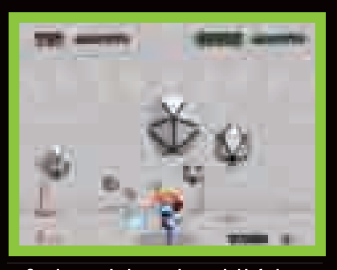
Release: 1985
Format: Arcade
Publisher: Sega
Developer: In-House

Back in 1985, Yu Suzuki was a god. He hadn't found a cure for cancer, devised an everlasting gobstopper, or invented a pint glass that would never empty, but he did create *Space Harrier* – one of the most vibrant and exciting arcade shooters we've ever played. Forget MAME, forget the so-so Mega Drive sequel and the excellent Sega Saturn conversion. Hell, forget the recent arcade-perfect port that appeared on Sega's recent *Space Harrier* compilation; the only way to truly experience this bad boy is in a huge hydraulic chair. It's only when you're being thrown about like a rag doll while using the huge, oversized joystick that you truly appreciate Suzuki's vision. *Space Harrier* was an experience unlike any other, and its arrival in arcades, along with titles such as *Hang On* (also by Suzuki), heralded a bright new age for videogames.

Thanks to a new sprite-scaling technique – also used in *OutRun* and *After Burner* – *Space Harrier* looked like nothing else around, and was liable to melt your eyeballs due to its stunningly detailed and fast-paced visuals. Taking control of the titular Space Harrier, your mission required you to simply clear each of the 18 levels – boasting bizarre names such as Moot, Asute and Nark – of their many enemies. Thanks to his whopping big jetpack, which doubled up as a handy laser, your Space Harrier was able to fly through the air and take down enemies as they flew toward you. That's right, toward you!



▲ This guy can be a right pain to defeat.



▲ Certain stages had a very claustrophobic feel.

For you see, while blasters like *Gradius*, *Defender* and *Scramble* were content to scroll from left to right (or right to left then back again, in *Defender*'s case), *Space Harrier*'s convincing scaling enabled your harrier to thunder into the screen at an alarming rate, and as he raced across the chequerboard landscapes the effect was mesmerising. Once you reached the end of a stage, your reward was to do battle with some of the most imaginative bosses that the inside of an arcade ever saw. From two-headed dragons, to huge metallic robots, each boss encounter was a memory to cherish forever. Sure, they weren't the most amazingly animated foes you'd seen, but they nevertheless came alive in front of you – and each defeated adversary simply pushed you on to see what bizarre creation Suzuki would throw at you next.

While a nifty trigger was needed to dispense foes, you also had to rely on cat-like reactions as each stage featured a variety of different objects to dodge. While it was possible to destroy trees, many hazards were indestructible so you had to keep moving if you wanted to get to the later levels. And as you reached those later stages the game got harder and faster until it felt like your brain would overload from the sheer amount of imagery that was being hurled at it.

For all its impressive visuals *Space Harrier*'s sound is also worthy of note. Not only had Sega included plenty



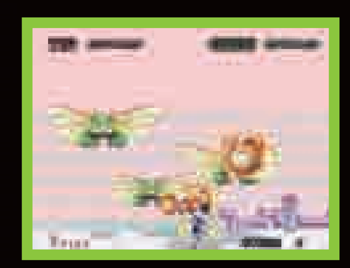
The very first dragon you'll face. Later bosses are a lot tougher.

"SPACE HARRIER LOOKED LIKE NOTHING ELSE AROUND"

of great speech – you'll never forget the first time you're welcomed to the Fantasy Zone – but the soundtrack was also a marvel and featured many hummable tunes that, once heard, were never forgotten. Indeed, *Space Harrier* was an aesthetic delight and even today it impresses with its smooth scrolling and memorable tunes.

While Suzuki and Sega had been slaving away on *Space Harrier's* looks and sounds, the gameplay hadn't been forgotten, and while it was somewhat simplistic, Suzuki had added a little extra to ensure that the game's pace never dropped. Whenever an enemy fired at you, it was always at your current position, and if you didn't move in time you were dead. There was no energy bar, no shield to absorb the shot, just an ear-piercing 'Aaaaaarrrggghhhhh!' as your Harrier dropped to the floor, followed by a 'get ready!' as he rose to continue the fight. As a result, your best course of action was to keep moving, which would be fine were it not for all the other bullets, enemies and the aforementioned indestructible objects that insisted on littering the playing field. *Space Harrier* may have been a simplistic blaster at heart, but it remains one of the most exhilarating arcade games we've ever played. Maybe there's a hydraulic cab for sale on eBay…



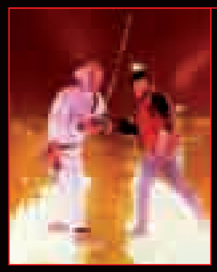


OTHER HIGHLIGHTS OF 1985



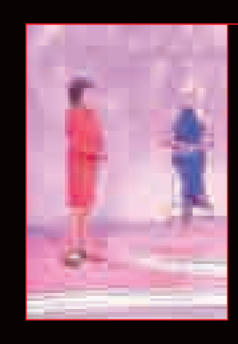
ON THE RADIO

Before she developed a nose for illegal substances, Whitney Houston was belting out amazing ballads such as *Saving All My Love For You* with which she had chart success in November 1985. As her musical career soared, she eventually moved into movies and had a double whammy with *The Bodyguard* and the theme song that accompanied it, *I Will Always Love You.*



AT THE MOVIES

In July of 1985, a fresh-faced Michael J Fox, strapped himself into a specially modified DeLorean, travelled back in time to meet his future parents, and made $210.6 million at the box office in the process. Full of catchphrases, mind-blowing effects and the wonderful Christopher Lloyd, *Back To The Future's* only downside is the fact that it spawned the atrocious pop act, McFly.



ON THE TELEVISION

Hosted by Cilla 'Lorra Laughs' Black, *Blind Date* was an instant success when it first aired in 1985 and lasted for a staggering 18 years. Using a similar format to American TV show *The Dating Game*, each contestant asked three members of the opposite sex a series of questions and chose their partner based on their answers. Worth watching if only to see the person's face when they picked a real minger.



Look how amazing *Space Harrier* looks… and this was back in 1985. Astounding.

Retro

Retro Feature

BEHIND THE SCENES

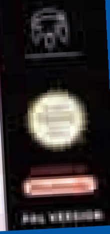
WETRIX



▲ Ste and John. Together, they are the 'Super Pickford Brothers'.

Released: 1997
Format: N64, PC
Publisher: Ocean
Developer: Zed Two





TETRIS-INSPIRED PUZZLE GAMES RARELY ACHIEVE THE SAME NOTORIETY AS THE GREAT RUSSIAN BLOCK DROPPER BUT ZED TWO'S WETRIX WAS AN ORIGINAL TAKE ON THE GENRE, THAT BECAME ONE OF N64'S MOST LOVED PUZZLERS AND SCORED HIGHER THAN ANY OTHER WESTERN GAME FOR YEARS IN FAMITSU WEEKLY. WE SPOKE TO THE CREATORS, JOHN AND STE PICKFORD, TO FIND OUT JUST HOW THEY PULLED IT OFF…

Let's get one thing straight from the start: *Wetrix* doesn't actually have that many similarities to *Tetris* (that was just an easy way to start the intro). The game features falling blocks of various shapes, but that's where the similarity ends. "We called it *Wetris* as a joke really and it stuck," explains John (game designer and lead programmer), "A bit embarrassing really as the game isn't a clone of *Tetris*". In actual fact, *Wetrix* is so unique that, apart from *Tetris'* falling blocks, it has nothing in common with any other game in existence. It begins with a flat piece of land, onto which rain slowly and steadily drops from the sky. The aim is to position the aforementioned falling blocks which have the power to raise or lower the land, to create physical pools and catch as much of the rain as possible. Creating large pools scores bigger points while allowing too much water to spill over the sides will result in a Game Over. The simple premise works incredibly well in practice, making for a thoroughly addictive game that is, in our minds, one of the few puzzle games that actually plays well in 3D.

Of course, anyone who's into puzzlers, and has owned an N64 in the last ten years, should be well aware of *Wetrix*'s merits. What may come as a surprise, however, is that the game actually started life as a completely different title that wasn't even part of the puzzle genre. During the formation of John and Ste's studio, Zed Two, the pair was working on a game called *Vampire Circus* in Ste's living room. "*Vampire Circus* was going to be a 3D *Gauntlet*-style game with hundreds of enemies on screen at once," elaborates John. "The environment was meant to be massively interactive with flowing water, flammable materials, all sorts of stuff." The brothers felt that *Vampire Circus'* in-built water effects were so good that they deserved to be built into a game of their own. So work began on *Wetrix* which was developed alongside *Vampire Circus* as the brothers hurriedly attempted to get either of the games signed to a publisher in order to get Zed Two off the ground. Manchester-based Ocean Software (may it rest in peace) eventually signed up both games, and while the brothers were forced to turn the promising *Vampire Circus* into the licensed Tasmanian Devil game *Taz Express* they were mostly left to their own devices on *Wetrix*.



▲ Wetrix appeared on a few formats but its the N64 one we love the most. Why? We're slobbering Nintendo fanboys, of course.



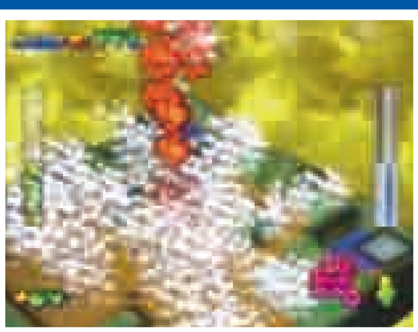
▲ The Japanese box art for *Wetrix* is much more cartoon-like than its Western counterparts.



With work on the PC version well under way, and an N64 version in the works, several challenges lay ahead for the Pickford Brothers. Chief of these was the worrying fact that neither brother had made a puzzle game before. "They are probably the hardest type of game to design, assuming we're talking about an original game", notes John, "A puzzle game lives or dies on its gameplay. It can't get by by dazzling you with cut-scenes, large areas to explore or level grinding. If the core gameplay doesn't work then you're knackered. Each element you add to a puzzle game will interact with everything else, so each new feature has to be very carefully considered." The chosen genre also proved troublesome for producer and lead artist Ste. "Apparently, simple games are actually surprisingly difficult to work on. If you aren't throwing loads of art assets at the player or dazzling them with new levels or locations, then there's nowhere to hide if any one feature is weak. I think the hardest things to get right visually were the simplest elements of the game. I must have drawn eight or nine variations of the up and down arrows which make up the basic pieces of the game, and quite a few different versions of the water bubbles. The things that you look at all the time in the game were much harder to get right than the one-off special effects or big event graphics."

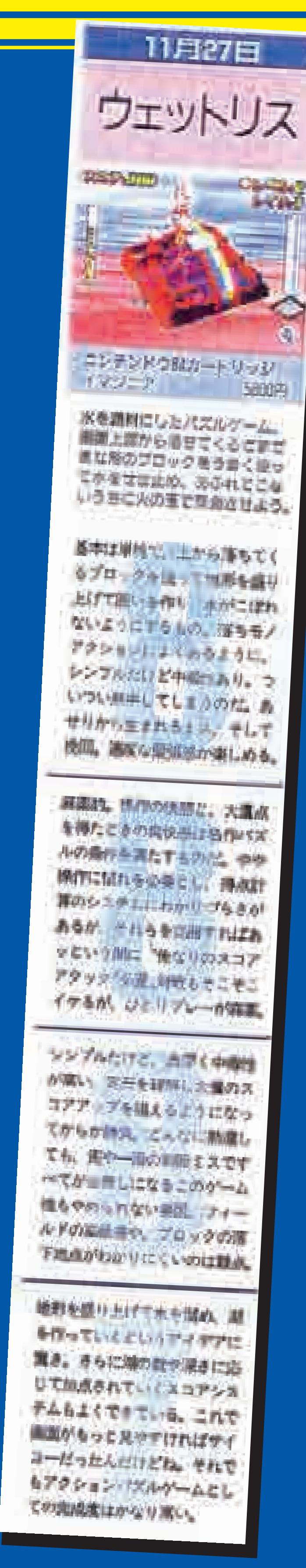
WITH SUCH ISSUES to consider, the brothers were very careful about any additions that were made to the game; as a result, *Wetrix*'s design remained focused and uncluttered with the emphasis squarely placed on making the final product as pure a gameplay experience as possible. Only two other elements were eventually added: a randomly appearing fireball that could be used to dissolve unwanted water in exchange for big points, and a bomb that would blow a hole in the landscape. Careful positioning of the bomb was essential in order to prevent any water from spilling out.

Although John and Ste both agree that the rule set was the hardest part of *Wetrix* to design, we imagine that implementing the realistic water physics and real-time landscape changes would have been much harder considering the technology of the time. Amazingly, John disagrees and causes us to rethink what we know about videogame technology. "It wasn't really difficult to get the land to change in real-time. The shocking thing is how unusual this still is. Polygonal 3D should be dynamic, but the way most games are made means rigid meshes for environments and canned



▲ Using a fireball is a great way to rack up massive bonus points.

"I THINK PEOPLE ARE ASSUMING IT'S THE POWER OF THE NEW HARDWARE THAT MAKES DYNAMIC 3D ENVIRONMENTS POSSIBLE. IT WAS ALWAYS POSSIBLE"


11月27日

ウェットリス

ニンテンドウ64カートリッジ

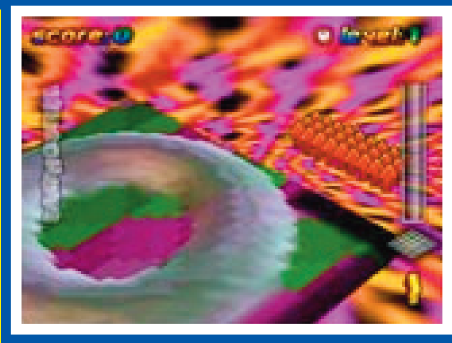
5800円

▲ The infamous *Famitsu* review. If anyone can read Japanese, please tell us what it says.



animation for the moveable objects. We are starting to see this on the next-gen machines and I think people are assuming it's the power of the new hardware that makes it possible. It was always possible." Similarly, John found the water physics to be just as easy to achieve as the land changes. "The water behaviour is just a simple cellular system where each cell compares itself with its neigbours and exchanges water if there's a difference. I've felt for a long time that dynamic environments are something that 3D can do extremely well but are rarely attempted simply because all the tools seem to be made by people who didn't anticipate that. Pretty much everything we did at Zed Two was an attempt at making fully destructible or at least massively changeable environments."

WETRIX WASN'T ALL about ground-breaking physics and tightly wound, clockwork gameplay though. With games like *Plok!* and *Equinox* to their credit, the brothers were obviously more than capable of producing cute and/or beautiful graphics, and *Wetrix* couldn't possibly go untouched by their digital paintbrush – it all had to tie in to the playing experience, of course. It was decided that the game should feature a couple of small visual signifiers to denote when the player is performing well, and to reward them. As such, a rainbow that multiplies all scores by ten while it remains on screen would appear when the water in the main lake reached a certain depth. When smaller lakes reached a depth of two or more then rubber ducks would appear in them. These multiplied any scores by two or more depending on how many ducks were on screen at once. But why ducks? "We loved *Sesame Street* as kids," reveals Ste, "and both used to impersonate Bert and Ernie – especially Ernie with his 'wubber ducky', and we had some fun putting Ernie and his rubber ducky into our NES *Sesame Street* games. As well as doing a whole bath-time mini-game, we also put a massive rubber ducky on one of the title pages – swimming back and forth across the screen in different disguises – so I guess we liked rubber duckies already." Ste continues, "Also, there's a confession I need to make here about the rubber ducky. When we were making PC *Wetrix* we had no money whatsoever. We were working in my front room, without any income for over a year, and I was doing the art for *Wetrix* and *Vampire Circus*, one of which we desperately needed to get signed quickly in order to pay some bills. I remembered that a free rubber duck model came with the original version of 3DStudio4 as one of the sample models. I emailed one of my old friends at Software Creations (where they might still have a copy of 3DS4 installed), and asked him to dig out the .DXF file of the model from the samples directory and email it to me. Sure enough, that was the model we used. I think it was just a render in the PC version, but we used that very model in the N64 version just to save me the time of building one myself when I was too busy setting up the studio."

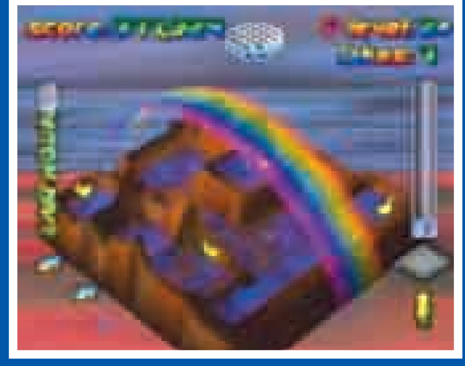


Wetrix made a 'big splash' with puzzle game fans.

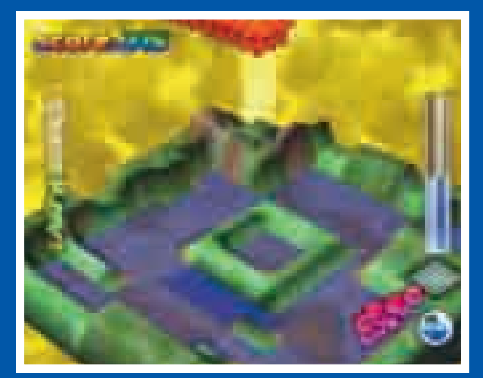
BOTH VERSIONS OF *Wetrix* were eventually completed in 1998 and published by Ocean as planned. Although sales of the PC version were



Wetrix had a decent Multi-player mode in which players could attack each other by sending too much water across.



A rainbow and four rubber ducks; *Wetrix* players live for moments like this.



GAME BOY WARS

Following its initial release, *Wetrix* was converted to a number of formats, but it's the Game Boy Color conversion that's of most interest because, in John's words, "The Game Boy version was atrocious." Ste explains how the game came into being, "Ocean did the deal behind our backs without our permission just because they could. The rights in the game were shared between us and Ocean, so they should have consulted us. Fortunately, in the arguments that followed us finding out, we managed to negotiate the return of all rights to future versions in return for giving Ocean handheld rights to *Wetrix*, which allowed us to do the Dreamcast and PS2 versions without any involvement with Ocean/Infogrames. After we found out, we got to see a half-finished version of the game. We thought the method they'd chosen to develop the game – using sprites for the water was all wrong. John even knocked up a demo/prototype system on Game Boy using characters to display a solid water level in 3D, but the Japanese developers ignored us. It's a shame because if the Game Boy version had been any good it might have done well."



It's not really the same without realistic water is it?

THE ONES THAT GOT AWAY

Including *Aqua Aqua*, there have been five iterations of the *Wetrix* brand; an impressive number until you realise that there are a few more *Wetrix*-related games in The Pickfords' own development hell. A seven-player mod pack for the PC version was never finished, a PSOne port of *Aqua Aqua* was finished and remains unreleased while a Japanese Dreamcast version of *Wetrix*, called *Aquapanic* was commissioned by Imagineer but dropped at the last minute due to the 'death' of the Dreamcast. "It's very disappointing to work on a game that doesn't get released", laments Ste, "especially when it's a good game, and especially when you finish it and it doesn't get released for some bullshit reason. But these situations arise all too often in the mainstream console business, especially if you're working on your own IP. There are so many hurdles between making an original game and getting it in front of an audience, especially if you haven't got a lot of money behind you, the surprising thing is not that two or three versions of *Wetrix* weren't released, but that we did manage to get four or five versions out there at all."

▼ An early logo design for the unreleased *Aqua Panic*.

modest (30,000+ sales, worldwide) the Nintendo 64 version fared much better, racking up sales of over 105,000 in Europe and North America. The game was even picked up by Imagineer for a Japanese release, which is where the tale of *Wetrix* takes an unexpected turn. Although only managing sales of just over 12,000 the game proved very popular with the specialist press and scored 8/8/8/7 in Japan's leading games magazine *Famitsu Weekly*. "That was nice", muses Ste, "We'd had games released and well received in Japan before. *Equinox* (*Solstice 2* in Japan) on the SNES had received awards in *Famitsu* magazine, and *Plok!* came out in Japan, so our initial reaction was, 'so what, it's been getting great reviews everywhere else too', but our Japanese publisher explained to us how few Western games ever get released in Japan, and how rare it is for a Western game to ever get a good review, so we were more impressed once the context of such a high review score had been explained to us." Based on this unexpected critical success, Imagineer actually commissioned the Pickford Brothers to produce a sequel, called *Aqua Aqua*, with minor alterations that would appeal more to a Japanese audience.

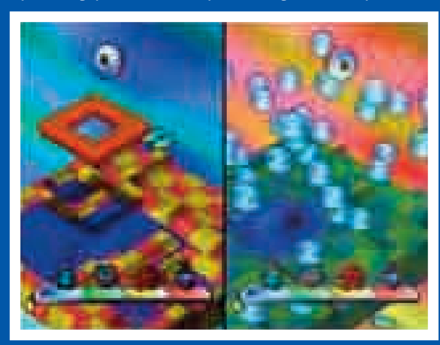
"When we were commissioned to do the sequel," explains John, "we came up with a lot of ideas. Sadly, Imagineer's idea of a sequel seemed to be to make the exact same game again with cute characters added. Actually, be thankful for the cute characters because their original idea involved a weird old man. No idea what that was about." Contrary to Imagineer's efforts, the Japanese version of *Aqua Aqua* did little to improve on *Wetrix*'s sales (15,000+), but the Western version took another 70,000; very impressive figures when you consider that there was no real difference from *Wetrix*. Although *Aqua Aqua*'s status as a PS2 launch title obviously helped boost sales.

As commercial interest in the *Wetrix* concept died out, the brothers never got to create their true sequel, but now that the pair have started their own independent studio, Zee-3, we live in hope that such a sequel may rise from the ashes. We asked John and Ste what they might include in such a game, and, while they were careful not to reveal too many valuable ideas, John did offer one small nugget of information. "I think the main idea we had was to allow the player to change the shape of the playfield by letting pieces overlap the edge and expand the land." Ste seems hopeful that the project may eventually see the light of day. "When we finish our current title, *Naked War*, we plan to look back at some of the game concepts we've worked on in the past and come up with new improved versions of those ideas, and develop them into new games which we'll sell online. *Wetrix* is definitely on the list of concepts we'd like to return to." Retro lives in hope.

"I REMEMBERED THAT A FREE RUBBER DUCK MODEL CAME WITH 3DSTUDIO4 AND THAT WAS THE MODEL WE USED"



▲ Players were notified of changes with these subtle warnings.



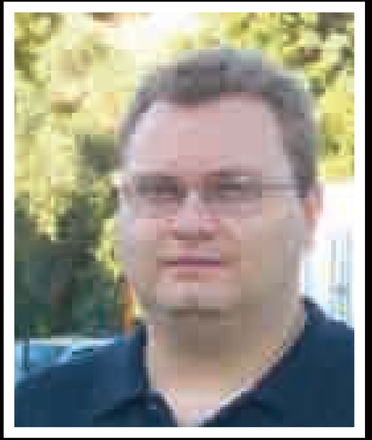
▲ Two-player mode in action.



▲ Apologies to our American friends, but your boxart is the worst.



UNSUNG HEROES SPECIAL: Part One



▲ The man behind the mic: Shane R Monroe.

SHANE R MONROE

IF THE INCREASINGLY POPULAR RETRO GAMING SCENE HAS A 'VOICE' THEN IT UNDOUBTEDLY BELONGS TO SHANE R MONROE, THE HOST OF RETROGAMING RADIO SINCE 1998. SHANE HAS BEEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF RETRO GAMING SINCE THE INCEPTION OF MAME, AND HAS AN AWFUL LOT TO SAY ABOUT THE HOBBY. SO MUCH, IN FACT, THAT WE'VE DECIDED TO EXTEND THIS INTERVIEW TO A TWO PART SPECIAL. ENJOY...

gamesTM: What inspired you to start RetroGaming Radio?

Shane R Monroe: In the late Nineties, emulation of classic games was in its infancy. Sure, for years we've seen remakes of classic games (like the endless *Pac-Man* clones), but now people were taking the code out of real arcade cabinets and writing programs to run these games on the personal computer. The preservation of these games meant a lot to me – growing up in the golden era of videogaming.

I started following the massive wave of gaming emulation and realised that there wasn't a good central source for classic gaming news and information and created a website to keep people up to date on this blossoming field. Of course, soon there were dozens of websites rehashing the same information and I wanted to be different. I thought a downloadable audio show that was delivered in a passionate and entertaining manner would set me apart from the others covering news. Understand, of course, that this was in 1998 – long before 'podcast' became a household word. Many people have written saying that RetroGaming Radio might have even invented the concept. I'm not so sure about that, but the show was very well received, despite the niche hardcore audience it was tailored to. I've been doing the show ever since.

gTM: What can listeners expect from RetroGaming Radio that they won't find on any other show?

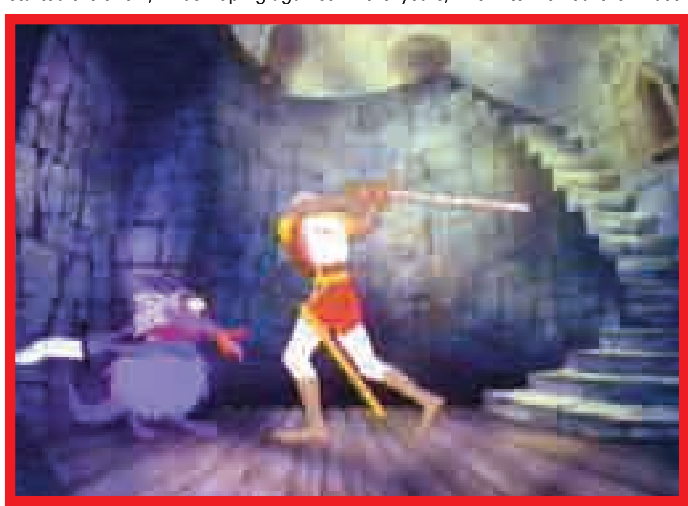
SRM: Unbelievable interviews for one. We aren't a traditional media outlet. We let gaming veterans talk about what they want for as long as they want. We don't can questions or read off cue cards. Our interviews are still garage-style free for alls that often step outside the lines. Being 'advertiser free' we can do what we want. This doesn't mean we don't censor the show – we do try to keep the show 'office friendly' – but it means that we get the kind of edgy, real-life interviews that people really want to hear, not covering the same 20 questions these people have answered over and over again through the years. The interviewees love our interviews so much that they often blow off other engagements to talk to us longer.

The other thing you'll find is passion. We don't make money on this show – we do it because we love it. Once you start taking in money, start running it like a business, and so on. your passion starts to die out – after all, it is like work now. While I've been accused of everything from hyperbole (which almost always accompanies passion) to fanboyism for my cherished topics, it never seems to keep the show from being dang entertaining and beloved.

gTM: What is your most cherished memory of the show so far?

SRM: Deep down inside, when I started the show, I was hoping against all hope that someday it would be big enough that I could actually meet and interview my heroes: the people that created the content that fed such a large portion of my childhood. While other kids were worshiping pop idols and sporting heroes, I dreamed of meeting famed animator Don Bluth [*Dragon's Lair*] and Cosmi programmer Paul Norman [*Forbidden Forest*]; these people were my heroes.

Over the course of RGR through the years, I've interviewed them both



▲ To meet the man behind *Dragon's Lair* would be a dream come true for any retro gamer.



▲ *Forbidden Forest* had a massive effect on a young Shane in 1983.

– as well as dozens of other people that influenced gaming forever such as David Crane, Gary Kitchen, Warren Davis, Ed Rotberg and Rick Dyer. I still get giddy as a schoolboy when I meet another of my heroes. Who is still on my list? Among others, Eugene Jarvis – the man behind probably the greatest videogame ever made: *Robotron*.

g™: Who have you most enjoyed interviewing and why?

SRM: That's a tough call. The best interview ever is one I can never air. It was with Gary Goldman (one of the animators of *Dragon's Lair*). Gary worked with Don Bluth at Disney during the Seventies and both picked up and left The Mouse because they started caring a little more about money and a little less about animation. For some reason, when I interview people they are completely at ease and often discuss things they later wish they hadn't. Goldman redefined this process by telling me a lot of things about Disney and its practices. Suffice to say, I couldn't air the interview and Goldman agreed to do one a bit less, er, libelous?

g™: What is it about radio as a medium that appeals to you?

SRM: Radio is one of the greatest mediums ever created. It can be ported and listened to anywhere. It is unobtrusive. You don't have to look like a metrosexual Adonis or a skeleton-thin bulimic to be successful at it (and it's a good thing in my case). Maybe best of all, there is a mystical wall between audience and provider that offers a certain level of anonymity to everyone, that something like TV or video breaks down. Would old, pot-smoking, beer-drinking, ex-Atari programmers give me the real scoop on what happened behind the scenes if I had a camera and a light on them? Of course not, but for some reason radio is safe. In some ways radio is even more intimate than any other broadcasting medium. Imagination is king.

g™: How will the lack of Classic Gaming Expo affect the show?

SRM: For starters, we're going to take the time to expand on the non-interview segments. There are still tons of things to talk about (we still have three-hour shows) that don't require a visit to CGE. I also have loads of contacts dying for phone interviews – something that we had trouble with in the early years – as well as many 'net celebrities' that we have easy access to. Along with that, we constantly get requests to do follow ups with the famous, as well as improve on really early interviews. All this will be possible to fill the gap that CGE leaves behind.

That doesn't mean I'm not crushed. Part of CGE was the fellowship among gamers and our own staff – we all live a great distance apart – and that is gone. All the vendors know each other, and part of CGE was just cruising around talking to the familiar faces, seeing how business is doing and just having a good time while working your ass off.

"WOULD POT-SMOKING EX-ATARI PROGRAMMERS GIVE ME THE REAL SCOOP IF I HAD A CAMERA ON THEM?"

▲ Shane thinks *Robotron* is the best game ever made. Would you agree?

g™: Running a show of this size must be very expensive. How do you fund the production?

SRM: I have a generous web hosting company Speedhost.com that handles my traffic and hosting needs. We've had a mutually beneficial relationship that doesn't require that I shill anything. I do plug his hosting because I personally use it for my other endeavours as well.

The rest of the funds are generated through the sales of 'archive discs' – past episodes on attractive DVD-ROM collections that feature not only the shows, but also the totally uncut (all cuts, bloopers and profanity are left in) interviews are included as well as tons of extras (exclusive images, videos and so on from the RGR team, shows, and folks we work with). The sales of these discs are very steady and continue to fund us to go to shows, buy hardware and software and even get us a treat every now and then.

We have been offered advertisement revenue for a long time and we always turn it down. That's just not what we are about.

LOOK OUT FOR PART TWO OF THE INTERVIEW NEXT MONTH. IN THE MEAN TIME, LISTEN TO RGR AT WWW.RETROGAMINGRADIO.COM.



▲ Sick of modern *Pac-Man* 'remakes'? You're not the only one.

THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION



THIS MONTH'S ULTIMATE COLLECTOR HAILS FROM BELGIUM – HOME TO THE WORLD'S BEST CHOCOLATE, AMONG OTHER THINGS. 29-YEAR-OLD TOM MAES WORKS IN A FACTORY THAT PRODUCES PHOTOGRAPHIC CHEMICALS AS A MIXER (FUJI) IN ORDER TO FEED HIS OBSESSION. HE HAS ABOUT 1,400 GAMES ACROSS 24 FORMATS AND IS ALWAYS ON THE LOOK OUT FOR MORE…


Tom's going to hang fire before entering the world of next-generation gaming.

gamesTM: When did your interest in games start?
Tom Maes: The arcades played a big part. My family always went to the Belgian coast during the summer, and there where lots of arcades. I remember staring at the screen of *Wonder Boy* and *Shinobi* coin-ops. My grandparents bought me a Sega Master System, and I quickly found people to trade games with. The interest really grew when I started buying magazines in the Mega Drive days, which always hyped up the next must-have games and showed what was to come. We always rushed to the stores in the hope of finding new pictures of these games, something the Internet has wasted nowadays.

gTM: How long have you been collecting?
TM: I've been playing games since the Master System days, but in order to go to the next platform I had to sell the current system – this continued until PSOne. When I went to London in 1998, I picked up a Mega CD1 with *Final Fight* in the CEX retro shop – when I got home I played it all night long. The next day I rushed out to buy some Mega Drive games I loved years ago and it naturally evolved into this collection.



gTM: Where do you buy most of your stuff?
TM: I buy lots of stuff new in local game stores. Today I go to garage sales hoping to find bargains, which does happen occasionally. And of course eBay because it's the easiest way to find lots of classic and import games. Also there's a shop nearby which allows me to trade games for as little as £3.

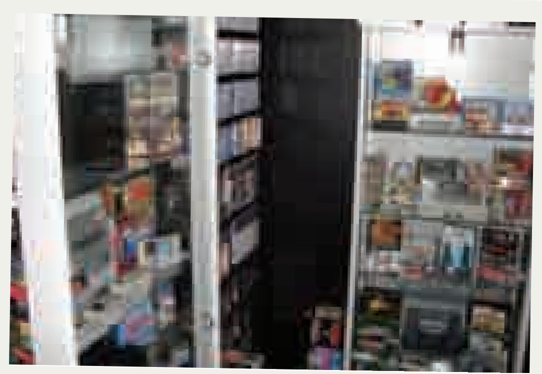
gTM: What consoles do you own?
TM: Master System, Game Gear, Mega Drive, Mega CD, 32X, Saturn Jap and PAL, Dreamcast, NES, SNES US and PAL, N64, GameCube, GBA SP NES Edition, Atari 2600, Atari 7800, Atari Jaguar, Phillips Videopac, C64, Coleco Vision, MB Vextrex, PlayStation, PlayStation2, Xbox Limited Green Edition and Neo Geo AES Jap.

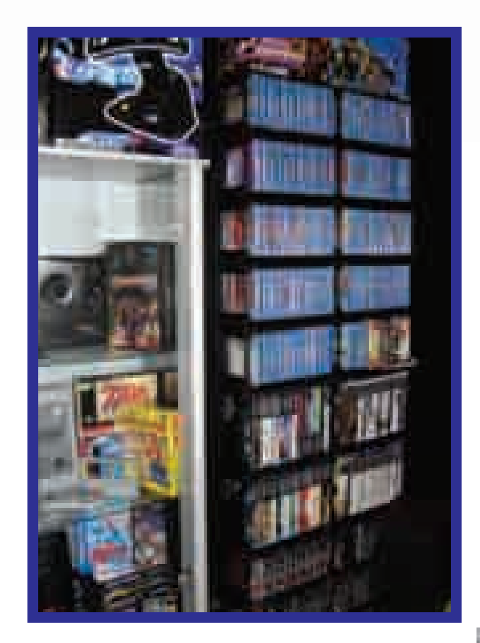
gTM: And how many games do you own?
TM: Around 1,300-1,400. Some of my games haven't even been played because of my collecting habits, but I hope to play them all in time. The last game I finished was *Shinobi* (Hard mode) on PS2, and that game has been with me since launch day – the same goes for *Rocket Knight Adventures* on Mega Drive.

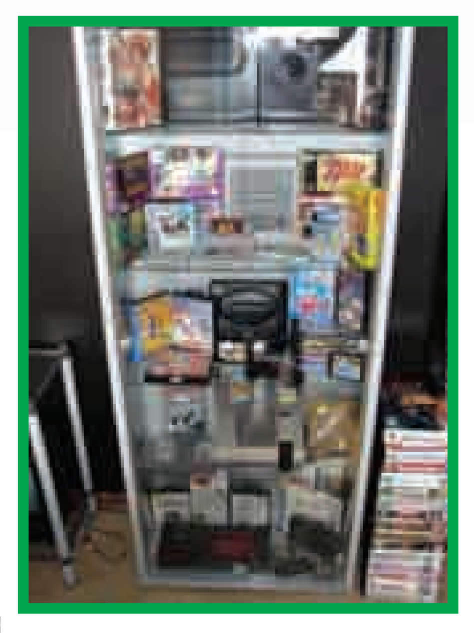


gTM: What's your favourite console and game?
TM: As a collector, I should say my Mega CD because it all started from there, but as a player I go for the Dreamcast because it did so many great things. It was very easy to import for, allowed the use of 60Hz and stopped the lazy arcade-to-home ports. It's a shame it was never the success it should have been with games like *Shenmue*, *Rez*, *Marvel Vs Capcom 2*, *Skies Of Arcadia*, *Code Veronica* and *Jet Set Radio* – these games have launched on other platforms, but it was Dreamcast that started them all.

gTM: What's your most prized videogame possession?
TM: The Neo Geo AES was my childhood dream, but for a kid this was way too expensive. I finally bought one last year and own around 20 games for it now. The feeling of sweet nostalgia still tingles down my spine when I power up my Neo Geo.







Tom is proud of his superb showcase of games and consoles.



gTM: What is your favourite game ever?
TM: I have a favourite game for each system, but if I had to choose I'd say the first *Metal Slug*, it plays like a dream and the attention to detail is amazing. *Saturn Bomberman* comes a close second. I also spend lots of time on *Samba De Amigo* and *Ridge Racer*.

gTM: What is your favourite videogame genre?
TM: Well, I love RPG games because I like a good story. Humour plays a big part for me, and that's why I love the Nippon Ichi and *Paper Mario* games. Also, the sci-fi elements in *Phantasy Star* have always captivated me. When I complete an RPG, I like to play something in between before moving to another RPG, the genre doesn't really matter to me. It was *Shinobi*… on to *Nightshade* and then I want to play *Makai Kingdom*.

gTM: What is your favourite gaming series?
TM: Several spring to mind like *King Of Fighters*, *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, *Metal Slug*, *Splatterhouse* and *Castlevania*. Picking one is impossible; it just has to do with the excellent control and timing these titles have.

gTM: What item is missing from your collection?
TM: A bit hard to tell since I work on one system at a time, PAL Saturn and Dreamcast have been completed. And now I've started on my Mega Drive collection – most Mega Drive games I'm looking for aren't really that expensive and some I can even pick up for less than a fiver, but I would love to own the entire *King Of Fighters*, *Metal Slug* and *Samurai Shodown* collections on my Neo Geo.

gTM: How much have you spent on your collection?
TM: I still like to sleep at night, so I really don't want to think about that. Most of the stuff I wanted I now own, but there where months that I spent over £300 on games… and that lasted for over three years. Also, the home cinema system with projector cost me over £4,000, but playing *Kingdom Hearts II* on it has made it all worthwhile.

gTM: Do you play on all of your consoles?
TM: Starting from Master System/NES to GameCube I play regularly, older systems like the Atari 2600 and C64 maybe once a year because I never new these systems in their glory days and have yet to really start collecting seriously for them. Xbox is the black sheep in my collection since I use it more as a DVD player than a game machine – there are only a few games like *OutRun2*, *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, *Metal Slug 3* and *4* that I still play on a regular basis.

gTM: Looking to the PS3 and Wii launches, are you going to buy either, both, a 360 or none?
TM: Wii certainly piques my interest, but I always wait for around ten original titles before I buy a console. 360 has only *Dead Rising* coming for me now, so my purchase will have to wait a bit. Same goes for PS3 with only *Virtua Fighter 5* tingling my senses. Right now I'm thinking of buying a DS because there are lots of excellent games and I'd love to play *Mario & Luigi: Partners In Time*.

gTM: Have you ever discovered a real bargain?
TM: How about an MB Vectrex with six games for as little as £4? I also bought over a hundred sealed Master System games for £30, *Suikoden II* for £3 and my *Simpsons* arcade machine for £15, which I've been trying to restore for over three years.

gTM: What are you most looking forward to playing?
TM: Clover Studio's *Okami*, the whole game looks mint – if it plays half as good as it looks, I'm in for a treat. Also Sega's *Yakuza* looks promising since a lot of *Shenmue* staff have been working on it. I hope we see part III of the amazing *Shenmue* series.



It's Sega's add-on the Mega CD that kick-started Tom's Ultimate Collection.



It's a veritable library of videogame goodness.







BUYERS' GUIDE

It might be easy to play retro games through emulation, but there's nothing quite like owning the original system – that musty smell of ancient electronics can never really be replicated with a PC. Of course, there's always a price to pay and unscrupulous dealers out to make a quick buck, but you really don't have to pay through the nose if you look in the right places. Charity shops, car boot sales and eBay are all good places to start, but before you do, use our guide to see how much you should be paying…

3DO

Panasonic 3DO	£40-£60
Goldstar 3DO	£45-£60

ACORN COMPUTERS

BBC Micro	£15-£25
Acorn Electron	£10-£25

AMSTRAD

Amstrad CPC 464	£10-£25
Amstrad CPC 664	£20-£25
Amstrad CPC 6128	£25-£50
Amstrad GX4000	£20-£60



ATARI

Atari VCS 2600	£20-£35
Atari ST	£20+ (depending on model)
Atari Lynx	£15+ (depending on model)
Atari Jaguar	£20

COMMODORE

Commodore Vic20	£10-£30
Commodore 64	£10-£30
Commodore Amiga	£20+ (depending on model)
Commodore CDTV	£20-£50
C64 GS	£30-£50
Commodore CD32	£25-£50



MISC

GCE Vectrex (General Consumer Electronics)	£60-£200
MB Vectrex (Milton Bradley)	£150-£200
JAMMA Compatible cabinets	£100-£350 (depending on model)
Super Gun	£120-£400 (depending on model)

NEC

PC Engine	£55-£70
Turbo Grafx-16	£30-£50
Turbo Duo	£120-£180
PC Engine GT	£70-£150
Super Grafx	£80 (prices can fluctuate)



NINTENDO

Game & Watch	£1-£200 (depending on model)
Nintendo Entertainment System	£15-£20
Game Boy/Game Boy Pocket	£5-£10
Game Boy Color	£10-£15
Super Nintendo	£20-£40
Virtual Boy	£80-£100
Nintendo 64	£10-£25

SEGA

Master System	£10-£30 (depending on model)
Mega Drive	£10-£20
Game Gear	£15-£25
Mega CD	£40-£70 (depending on model)
Sega 32X	£35
Sega Nomad	£70-£140
Saturn	£30+ (depending on model)
Dreamcast	£25+ (depending on model)

SINCLAIR

ZX-81	£40-£70
ZX Spectrum 48K	£20-£50
ZX Spectrum +	£30
ZX Spectrum 128K	£40
ZX Spectrum +2	£35
ZX SPECTRUM +3	£40

SNK

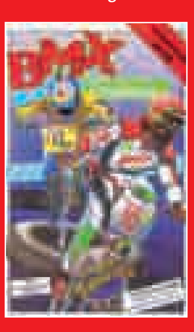
Neo Geo MVS Single Slot (arcade system)	£70+ (depending on model)
Neo Geo AES (home System)	£150+
Neo Geo CD	£100+
Neo Geo CDZ	£80+
Neo Geo Pocket Color	£35

Right then, you've just picked up a second-hand computer and are looking for some classic games to play on it. The only problem is, you're not too sure what to buy. Hopefully we can help. To celebrate Codemasters' 20th birthday, we're looking at the best from its budget range

BMX Simulator

Estimated Price: £1+
System: Various 8-bit systems
Developer: Richard Darling

This is where it all began for the Darling Brothers. The first game Codemasters ever released, *BMX Simulator* set a precedent – namely through the use of the word 'Simulator' in the title – for a company that would go from strength to strength using a variety of *Super Sprint* clones and, most famously, using ecstatic quotes from the brothers to sell its games. While superseded by both *BMX Simulator II* and *Professional BMX Simulator*, this is still worth hunting down.



Dizzy

Estimated Price: £1+
System: Various 8-bit systems
Developer: The Oliver Twins

Dizzy is without doubt one of the most famous 8-bit heroes of all time, and stands proud next to the likes of *Sabre Man*, *Monty Mole* and *Jack The Nipper*. While Dizzy's first outing isn't his best – there are far too many instant death situations – it does feature great cartoony visuals, plenty of head-scratching puzzles and of course the lovable egg himself. Fortunately, his later adventures were far better structured, and the popular hero (and Codemasters) flourished.



Grand Prix Simulator

Estimated Price: £1+
System: Various 8-bit systems
Developer: The Oliver Twins

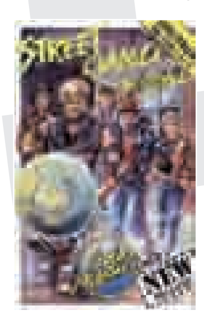
Another predictable yet enjoyable top-down racer from Codies, this time by the Oliver Twins. Predictably, it's a more accurate *Super Sprint* clone as the game is based upon F1 racing and not the local BMX track. Featuring plenty of Codemasters' traits, such as the digitised speech at the beginning of the game and the self-congratulatory blurb on the back of the cassette, *Grand Prix Simulator* is a solid racer and you can't go wrong for £1.99.



Street Gang Football

Estimated Price: £1+
System: Various 8-bit systems
Developer: Peter Williamson

We mention *Street Gang Football* not because it's one of the greatest 8-bit footie titles, or because it was a sterling effort from Codemasters. No, we mention this because it's so atrocious that even the computer-controlled opponent gets pissed off and stops playing. It was obviously meant to show off the 'hardness' of street gangs, but all it really did was convince you that if the computer can't be bothered, neither should you.



Fantasy World Dizzy

Estimated Price: £1+
System: Various 8-bit/16-bit systems
Developer: The Oliver Twins

It's easy to see why Dizzy's third adventure is considered his best. The graphics look better than ever, the map design is far more complex and doesn't feature the impassable sections that made the original such a pain, and the puzzles have been greatly refined. Best of all, unlike *Treasure Island Dizzy* which only gave you one life, you're back to your standard three lives, so progression is much easier.



Ninja Massacre

Estimated Price: £1+
System: Various 8-bit systems
Developer: Adam Waring

Why don't games have names like *Ninja Massacre* any more? Don't be fooled by its awesome name, though, as this is effectively Codemasters' own take on the Ed Logg classic, *Gauntlet*. Rather than face off against a variety of different fantasy enemies, you get to fight ninjas – lots of ninjas. While *Ninja Massacre* was never a huge hit when it was released – *Crash* magazine gave it a measly 45 per cent – it's become a bit of a guilty pleasure for us. Limited, but fun.



Kwik Snax

Estimated Price: £1+
System: Various 8-bit/16-bit systems
Developer: W.A.S.P.

Such was Dizzy's popularity that he soon began to appear in all sorts of genres. Reactions were mixed, but fortunately *Kwik Snax* is one of the best non-adventure titles he starred in. It's a delightfully addictive puzzler that shouldn't be missed under any circumstances. Based on the old arcade hit *Pengo*, *Kwik Snax* boasts bright, vibrant visuals, a wonderfully catchy theme tune and plenty of well thought-out puzzles to solve. Don't miss it.

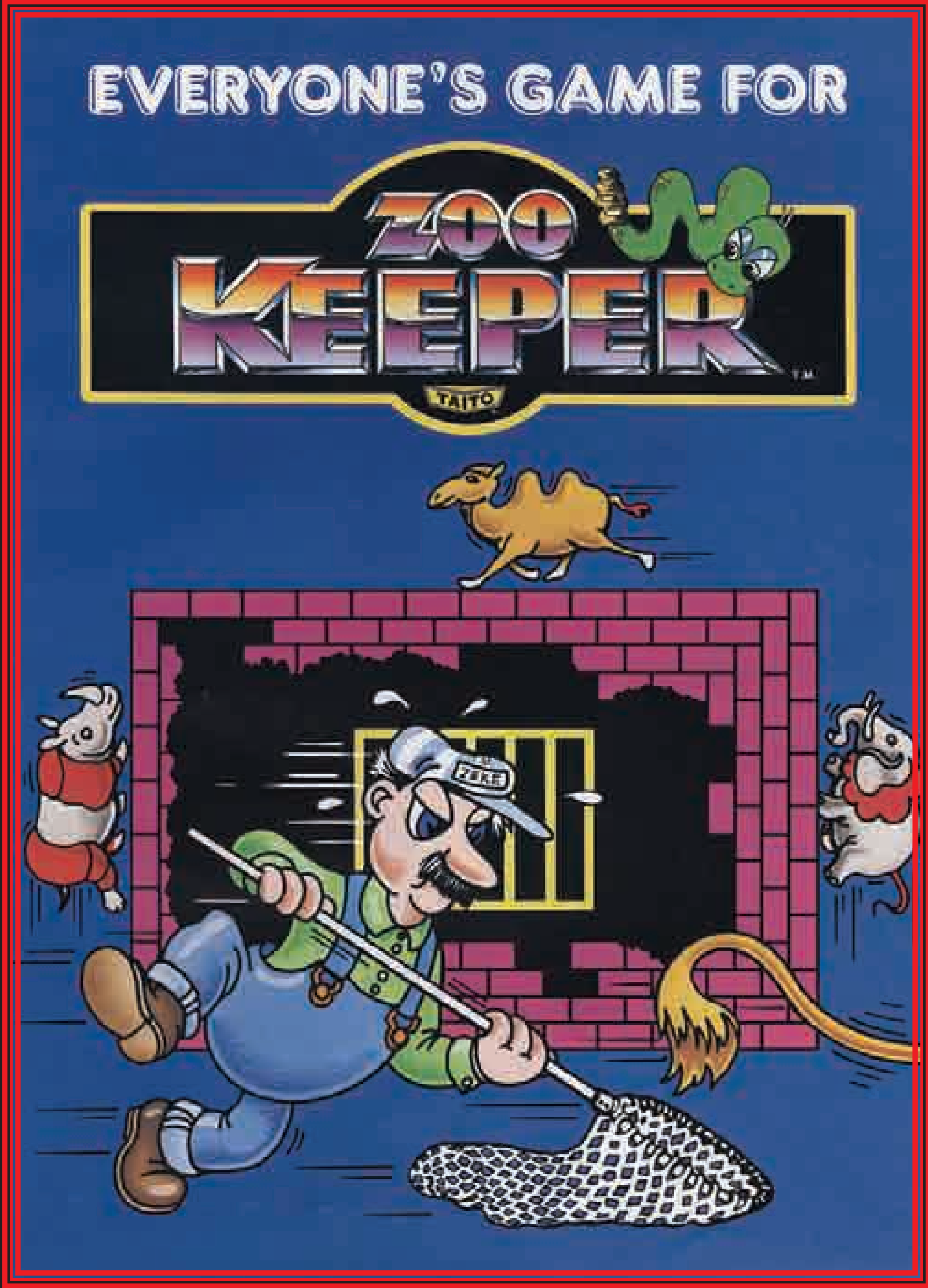


Seymour At The Movies

Estimated Price: £1+
System: Various 8-bit systems
Developer: Big Red Software

After creating numerous *Dizzy* games, Big Red Software came up with its own hero, the lovable Seymour. Despite being similar in style to the Dizzy games – 'if it ain't broke' and all that – Seymour soon picked up plenty of his own fans, and Codemasters had yet another recognisable character. This is Seymour's first game and, despite being fairly easy, it remains a charming experience. *Dizzy* fans will love it, even if it is a little predictable.





ZOO KEEPER [Arcade] Taito, 1982 – Original US Advert

PERIPHERALS

EACH CONSOLE HAS THOSE MUST-HAVE PERIPHERALS – CAN YOU KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF THEM?

SOUND BLASTER X-FI FATAL1TY

MASTER BLASTER

Console: PC
From: Creative
Price: £169.99
Available: Now

Having broken ground with each new Sound Blaster that came before it, Creative launched its latest must-have accessory last year – the Sound Blaster X-Fi range – and is now re-promoting it with the release of *Prey*. Elite Pro, Platinum, XtremeMusic and Fatal1ty are the varied models; the latter being our test card and the most relevant to today's gamer. Associated with the world's best-known professional gamer, Johnathan 'Fatal1ty' Wendel, the X-Fi Fatal1ty provides the equivalent performance of 24 Audigy cards and 30 Live cards. The impressive card features 10,000 MIPS, 109DB SNR Playback, X-Fi CMSS-3D – 3D sound through headphones, that has to be heard to be believed – and X-Fi 24-bit Crystallizer that enhances MP3s to sound better than the original CD. Impressive stuff and a must for the PC gamer.

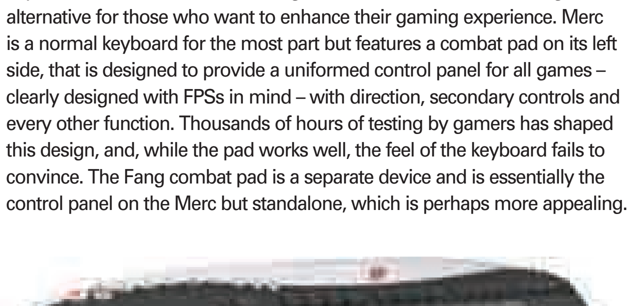


MERC & FANG ZBOARDS

GRAB YOUR BOARDS

Console: PC
From: Ideazon
Price: Merc – £24.79 (excl VAT)
Fang – £21.69 (excl VAT)
Available: Now

It's difficult to imagine how a keyboard specially designed for PC gaming could make a big impact on the gaming scene; after all, keyboards are, well, keyboards. Enter the Merc and Fang Zboards, which look to offer a genuine alternative for those who want to enhance their gaming experience. Merc is a normal keyboard for the most part but features a combat pad on its left side, that is designed to provide a uniformed control panel for all games – clearly designed with FPSs in mind – with direction, secondary controls and every other function. Thousands of hours of testing by gamers has shaped this design, and, while the pad works well, the feel of the keyboard fails to convince. The Fang combat pad is a separate device and is essentially the control panel on the Merc but standalone, which is perhaps more appealing.





NITRO RACING WHEEL

GET BEHIND THE WHEEL

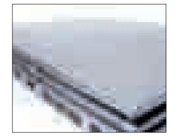
Console: Xbox 360
From: Joytech
Price: £59.99
Available: Now

Steering wheels for consoles have always failed to tear us away from the comfort, familiarity and performance of the ever-reliable joypad. So many have come and gone without making any waves. Without a comfortable setup – say, a replica racing chair setup or, more realistically, a good-sized table and chair – a steering wheel can prove more of a nuisance than an advantage. However, get the setup right and the Nitro Racing Wheel might just be what you've been waiting for. Featuring dual-vibration feedback, sturdy foot pedals and a high-low gear stick, the feel of this wheel certainly banishes the bitter memories of steering wheels past. While it's no revelation and won't appeal to everyone, Joytech's Nitro Racing Wheel should delight those who enjoy using wheels over pads… though it's far better suited to *Test Drive* than *Burnout*.

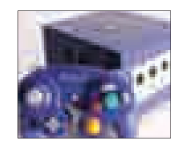
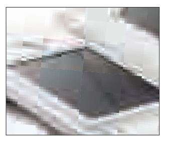


PS2 | PSP | XBOX | XBOX 360 | GAMECUBE | DS | GBA | PC

ESSENTIALS

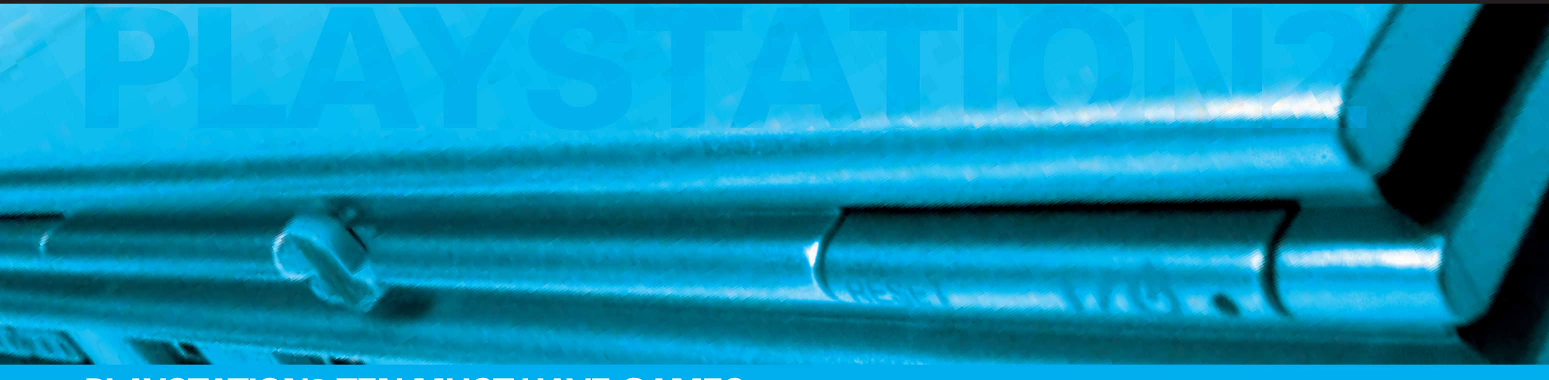






TOO MANY GAMES, NOT ENOUGH MONEY. THANKFULLY, NOT ALL OF THEM ARE WORTH SPENDING YOUR HARD-EARNED CASH ON. IF YOU WANT TO TASTE THE CREAM OF THE CROP, YOU'VE COME TO THE RIGHT PLACE



PLAYSTATION2 TEN MUST-HAVE GAMES

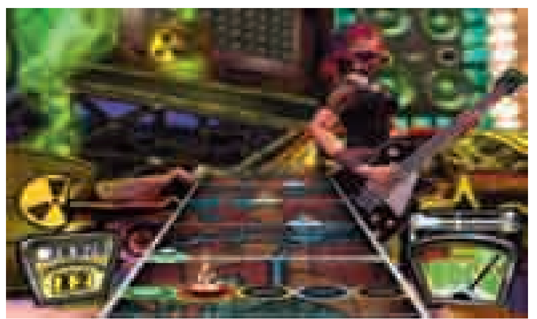
1 GUITAR HERO

Publisher: RedOctane
Developer: Harmonix
Genre: Rhythm
Price: £49.99

Not even we could have predicted the enormous success of *Guitar Hero*. The very idea divided the office into two viciously opposed sides, but every single person fell for its charms within minutes of their first strum, with not a drop of alcohol in sight. Though produced on a tight budget – hence the lack of the original artists' recordings – all presentation issues are charged down by the blinding genius of the concept. With *Guitar Hero 2* looming large and a considerable amount of extra clout behind it, this is a franchise that could run and run. Here's hoping for some Boston this time too.

ISSUE: **40** SCORE: **9**







2 SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

Publisher: Sony Developer: In-House
Genre: Adventure Price: £39.99

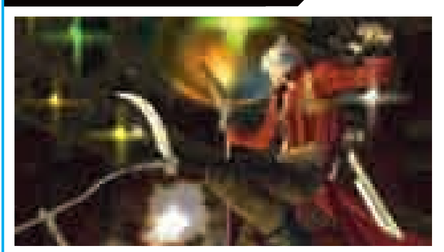


The second of two consecutive masterpieces from Fumito Ueda, *Shadow Of The Colossus* is more than we ever hoped for. Subverting genre conventions by framing each level around a single, gargantuan enemy, it's a mesmerising experience and as unique a game as you'll find.

ISSUE: **39** SCORE: **9**

3 DEVIL MAY CRY 3

Publisher: Capcom Developer: In-House
Genre: Action Price: £39.99

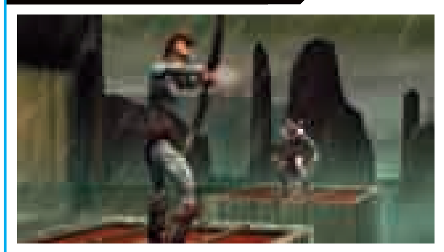


The original was great, the sequel disappointing, but the third instalment in the *Devil May Cry* series stands as the best. Flashing back to Dante's early life, this is considerably more difficult than its predecessors and is all the better for it. For straight-up action, this takes some beating.

ISSUE: **30** SCORE: **8**

4 GOD OF WAR

Publisher: Sony Developer: In-House
Genre: Action Price: £39.99



The vast majority of our ten-best were bolts from the blue, and *God Of War* is no different. It may be mere months away from becoming a franchise, but initially the title barely had a marketing campaign. This was a success through sheer, blinding quality and white-knuckle excitement.

ISSUE: **32** SCORE: **9**

5 GRAND THEFT AUTO: VICE CITY

Publisher: Rockstar Developer: In-House
Genre: Action Price: £19.99



Oh, where to begin? *Grand Theft Auto III* was a masterpiece and few thought it could be bettered so soon after its release. How wrong they were. *Vice City* exceeds the original in scope, ambition and visual panache, and has possibly the best soundtrack in the history of gaming.

ISSUE: **1** SCORE: **9**

6 AMPLITUDE

Publisher: Sony Developer: Harmonix
Genre: Rhythm Price: £39.99

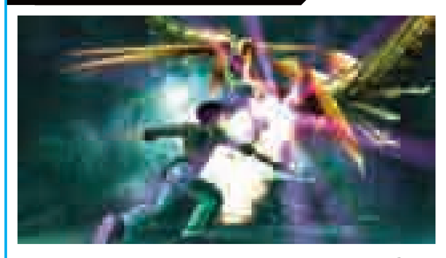


This is the game Harmonix accomplished before making our number one over on the left there. *Guitar Hero* has the peripherals and the fun, but *Amplitude* is more complex and more demanding, rewarding solo gaming in ways that its illustrious descendent could only dream of.

ISSUE: **8** SCORE: **8**

7 BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

Publisher: Ubisoft Developer: In-House
Genre: Adventure Price: £39.99

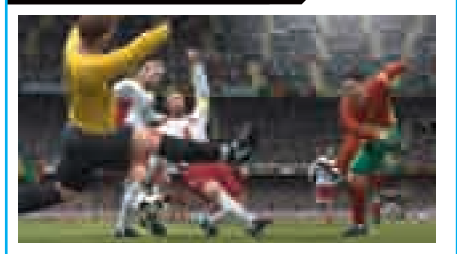


Peter Jackson was so impressed by *Beyond Good & Evil* that he requested Michel Ancel be involved with *King Kong*. A bad move on Ancel's part, for his skill with storytelling is rare in videogames and could never have flourished on a movie licence, which is all the more reason to play this.

ISSUE: **12** SCORE: **8**

8 PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 5

Publisher: Konami Developer: In-House
Genre: Sport Price: £14.99

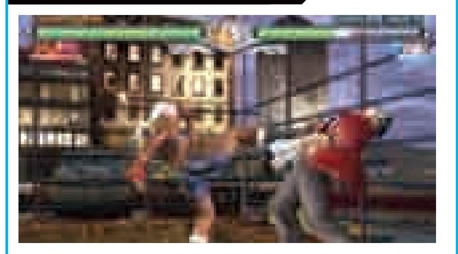


Of all the game's that have come and gone, it's *Pro Evo* that takes pride of place in our PS2 come lunchtime. Realistic enough for the die-hards and fun enough for everyone else, nothing stands a chance of dethroning this as king of the football sims. Well, until *Pro Evo 6*, that is.

ISSUE: **N/A** SCORE: **8**

9 VIRTUA FIGHTER 4: EVOLUTION

Publisher: Sega Developer: In-House
Genre: Fighting Price: £39.99

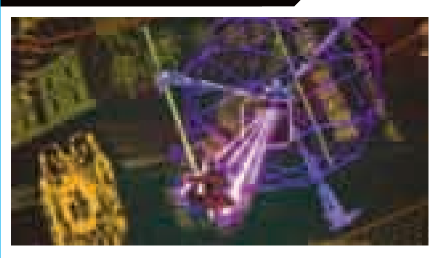


Some prefer *SoulCalibur II* while others go for *Tekken 3*. In many ways it's a matter of personal taste, but for depth, subtlety and sheer difficulty it's *Virtua Fighter 4* all the way. *Evolution*'s minor improvements may not quite justify the price tag, but this is still king of the fighting castle.

ISSUE: **5** SCORE: **8**

10 REZ

Publisher: UGA Developer: In-House
Genre: Shoot-'Em-Up Price: £39.99



Calling *Rez* a shoot-'em-up is to do it a disservice. We all have a clear idea of what a shoot-'em-up is, and you can bet your bottom dollar that *Rez* won't fit any of them. Tetsuya Mizuguchi has created for games what the concept album is to music. This generation's *Panzer Dragoon*.

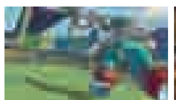
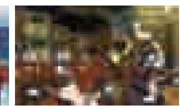
ISSUE: **N/A** SCORE: **8**

PS2 | PSP | XBOX | XBOX 360 | GAMECUBE | DS | GBA | PC

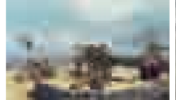
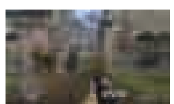
ESSENTIALS

TOO MANY GAMES, NOT ENOUGH MONEY. THANKFULLY, NOT ALL OF THEM ARE WORTH SPENDING YOUR HARD-

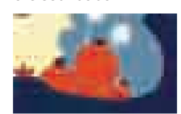
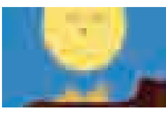
JET SET RADIO FUTURE
One of the earlier Xbox games and so 'street' it's almost painful. Whizz around a gloriously styled city, on rollerblades, graffiti flying from your fists to a pumping soundtrack. What could be better?

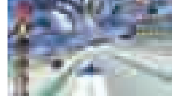
CALL OF DUTY 2
With all the furore surrounding Xbox 360, it was all too easy to feel disappointed by this. It may not be next gen, but it is a hugely satisfying experience and more than enough to keep us going until *Call Of Duty 3*.

LOCOROCO
Did somebody say, 'best game on the PSP'? Oh yeah, that was us, and it still is. It's short but sweet, and while it lasts is one of the happiest experiences in videogaming. We can't wait for the soundtrack.

F-ZERO GX
F-Zero GX has everything you could want from an update. Bigger, faster and slicker in every department imaginable, so that even the rose-tinted spectacles of nostalgia can't affect our love for it.




Title	Publisher	Developer	Issue	Score
Xbox Ten Must-Have Games				
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	Electronic Arts	DICE	38	8
Burnout 3	Electronic Arts	Criterion	23	10
Halo 2	Microsoft	Bungie	26	9
Jet Set Radio Future	Sega	Smilebit	N/A	8
Ninja Gaiden Black	Microsoft	Tecmo	18	8
Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath	Electronic Arts	Oddworld Inhabitants	28	9
OutRun 2	Sega	Sumo Digital	24	8
Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow	Ubisoft	In-House	22	8
Street Fighter Anniversary Collection	Capcom	In-House	N/A	8
TimeSplitters: Future Perfect	Electronic Arts	Free Radical	29	8
Xbox 360 Ten Must-Have Games				
Burnout Revenge	Electronic Arts	Criterion	37	9
Call Of Duty 2	Activision	Infinity Ward	39	8
Condemned: Criminal Origins	Sega	Monolith	39	7
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	2K Games	Bethesda	43	9
Fight Night: Round 3	Electronic Arts	In-House	43	8
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft	In-House	45	9
Hitman: Blood Money	Eidos	IO Interactive	45	8
Prey	2K Games	Venom Games	46	8
Project Gotham Racing 3	Microsoft	Bizarre Creations	39	9
Quake 4	Activision	Id Software	38	8
PlayStation Portable Ten Must-Have Games				
Burnout Legends	Electronic Arts	Criterion	37	9
Football Manager 2006	Sega	In-House	N/A	8
Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	Rockstar	In-House	39	8
Lumines	Ubisoft	Q Entertainment	28	8
LocoRoco	Sony	In-House	46	9
Mercury	Sony	Awesome Studios	32	8
Metal Gear Ac!d 2	Konami	In-House	44	7
Pursuit Force	Sony	In-House	39	7
Ridge Racer	Sony	Namco	28	8
WipEout Pure	Sony	In-House	31	8
GameCube Ten Must-Have Games				
Animal Crossing	Nintendo	In-House	1	8
Alien Hominid	O3 Entertainment	The Behemoth	27	8
Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem	Nintendo	Silicon Knights	N/A	8
F-Zero GX	Nintendo	Amusement Vision	10	9

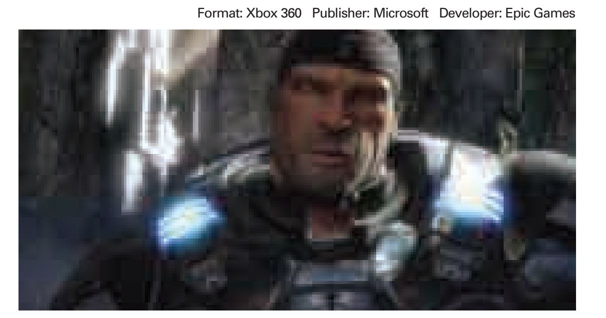
ON THE HORIZON

THEY MAY NOT BE HERE JUST YET, BUT WE FEEL THAT

GEARS OF WAR

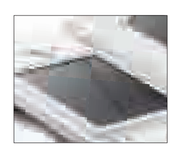
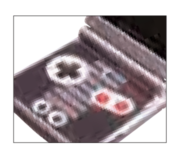
Format: Xbox 360 Publisher: Microsoft Developer: Epic Games

We've been watching this one very closely ever since the first footage emerged, and now the moment of truth is at hand. It knocked 'em dead at E3 – us included – and as good as it looks it's the fantastic cover/shoot gameplay mechanic that really thrills. Xbox 360 isn't short of decent shooters, but we're hoping *Gears Of War* will see us through to the arrival of *Halo 3*.







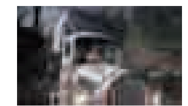





EARNED CASH ON. IF YOU WANT TO TASTE THE CREAM OF THE CROP, YOU'VE COME TO THE RIGHT PLACE

Ikaruga	Treasure	In-House	2	8
killer7	Capcom	In-House	34	9
Metroid Prime	Nintendo	In-House	2	10
The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker	Nintendo	In-House	5	9
Resident Evil 4	Capcom	In-House	29	9
Viewtiful Joe	Capcom	In-House	24	8
Nintendo DS Ten Must-Have Games				
Animal Crossing: Wild World	Nintendo	In-House	40	8
Daigasso! Band Brothers	Nintendo	In-House	29	8
Kirby: Power Paintbrush	Nintendo	HAL Labs	31	8
Mario Kart DS	Nintendo	In-House	39	7
Meteos	Nintendo	Q Entertainment	31	9
Nintendogs	Nintendo	In-House	37	7
Ossu! Tatakae! Ouendan!	Nintendo	Inis	37	8
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney	Nintendo	Capcom	23	8
Trauma Center: Under The Knife	Nintendo	Atlus	39	8
Zoo Keeper	Ignition Entertainment	Success	30	8
Game Boy Advance Ten Must-Have Games				
Advance Wars 2: Black Hole Rising	Nintendo	In-House	8	9
Castlevania: Aria Of Sorrow	Konami	In-House	6	8
Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga	Nintendo	AlphaDream	14	9
Mario Golf: Advance Tour	Nintendo	Camelot	22	7
Metroid: Zero Mission	Nintendo	In-House	17	8
Pokémon Pinball: Ruby & Sapphire	Nintendo	In-House	11	8
Street Fighter Alpha 3 Upper	Ubisoft	Crawfish	1	8
Super Mario Advance 3: Yoshi's Island	Nintendo	In-House	N/A	8
The Legend Of Zelda: The Minish Cap	Nintendo	In-House	25	7
WarioWare: Twisted!	Nintendo	In-House	31	8
PC Ten Must-Have Games				
Battlefield 2	Electronic Arts	DICE	34	9
City Of Heroes	NCsoft	Cryptic Studios	21	8
Football Manager 2006	Sega	Sports Interactive	N/A	9
Grim Fandango	LucasArts	In-House	N/A	8
Guild Wars	NCsoft	AreaNet	33	8
Half-Life 2	Vivendi	Valve Software	N/A	9
The Movies	Activision	Lionhead Studios	39	9
Unreal Tournament 2004	Atari	Digital Extremes	18	8
Sam & Max Hit The Road	Activision	LucasArts	N/A	9
World Of Warcraft	Vivendi	Blizzard	30	9

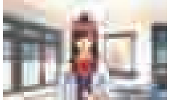
RESIDENT EVIL 4

Who would have thought it could take so many games for the *Resident Evil* series to reach its peak? Suitably scary and far more action packed, there's not an ounce of fat here. Truly brilliant horror gaming.



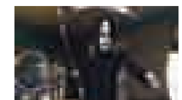
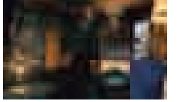

PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY

A game about a defence attorney sounds like it should be terrible, but with Nintendo DS anything is possible. *Phoenix Wright* is far more captivating than it has any right to be. The defence rests.

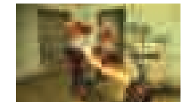
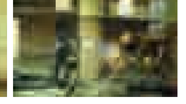
GRIM FANDANGO

A superbly stylish and wickedly funny point-and-click from the genre's heyday. Many would argue that they never got any better, and it would be downright rude of us to disagree. This is anything but grim.

HALF-LIFE 2

With the new episodes hitting the shelves as we write this boxout, there's no more appropriate time to go back to the source. One of the very best PC games ever released. And that's no half truth.

THESE TITLES COULD BE APPEARING IN OUR LISTS IN THE NOT-TOO-DISTANT FUTURE

PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 2007

Format: Multi Publisher: Konami Developer: In-House

There are number of games we could have included here – *Rainbow Six Vegas, Metal Gear Solid 4, Resistance: Fall Of Man* – but we'd be lying if we said we weren't all dewy eyed in anticipation of the latest instalment of *Pro Evo*. The undisputed office champion, we've already gone through several copies of the current version and are itching to get our hands on the next generation's take.





NEXT MONTH IN GAMES™

Viva indeed. games™ journeys to the Nevada Desert with the Rainbow boys…

RAINBOW SIX VEGAS



NEXT MONTH



Hawk's eighth outing should prove his best. A rebuilt engine and HD visuals make this very promising.

MORE… REVIEWS

It's month two of the seasonal gaming push, and that means we have a host of reviews for your delectation. *Crackdown*, *Tony Hawk's Project 8* and *GTA: Vice City Stories* are all on our watch list. With *Splinter Cell: Double Agent* and *Company Of Heroes* making up the numbers, it will be a strong review line up in issue 49.

"VICE CITY PSP SHOWS WHAT A TALENTED TEAM CAN DO WITH AN EXTRA YEAR"



We are so excited about *Pro Evo* on 360 that our assistant designer has actually exploded.

MORE… PREVIEWS

Well, it's Leipzig time again and you know what that means don't you? Oh yes, *Pro Evolution Soccer* on Xbox 360. We will also be taking an in-depth look at *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas* on 360, and, as PlayStation3 nears its long-awaited launch date, we'll be going hands on with as much Sony goodness as is humanly possible.

"OUR FAVOURITE FOOTBALL GAME IS FINALLY MAKING ITS NEXT-GEN DEBUT"



A member of the games™ team owns this TV. It makes him feel better about himself.

MORE… FEATURES

We'll be giving you the low down on both the Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival and the Leipzig Games Convention next month. Expect interviews with game development's leading lights, and the usual **games™** insight into the coming year's videogaming. We also take a look at HDTV, and bring you the latest on the best gaming set-ups available.

ON SALE 05 OCT '06

CONTACT

ILLUMINATING THE WORLD OF games™

Enough of what we think – now you get to show off your rapier wit to praise, criticise or mock the games industry. Or not…

I'VE COME TO the conclusion that people don't understand computer games any more. Of course, there are serious gamers who are above this ignorance, but most seem to have lost sight of what a videogame is.

Games used to be a test of skill as much as they were an experience, but, as graphics improve, companies seem content to make games as near to real life or films as possible. I heard a conversation on the radio, where the presenter asked if anyone had cried while playing a computer game. A fair question, but it illustrates the misconception that games are just films that you control, and that because their storytelling is not yet as sophisticated as films they are inferior.

I'm not saying that *Fahrenheit* or *Metal Gear Solid* are bad, I'm trying to suggest that games are more sophisticated than people realise. Beating your friends at *Halo*, completing an RPG after 80+ hours of playing, or perfecting your racing line for competing on Xbox Live are experiences no film can replicate. Those who try to understand and appreciate games will find far more variety in their experiences. Hopefully, people will realise this instead of dismissing them so easily.

Sam Cassie

games™: We like your thinking, Sam. We're as fond of cinematic gaming as anyone, but we do agree that perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on the qualities that cross over with film. This needn't be a problem, but if wider society begins to forget the unique pleasures found in videogames then it can only be bad news. We're certain that gamers are alive to the beauty of a perfect *Burnout* lap, or a skilfully executed flanking manoeuvre on multi-player *Halo*, and those who don't play games don't really have to understand it.

When a radio DJ criticises games for not being as emotive as cinema, or having the depth of narrative found in literature, they're really referring to games that aspire to those qualities. It may seem harsh, but if a game is trying that desperately to be a movie then it deserves the comparison, and at this stage in gaming evolution they're bound to suffer.

I FELT COMPELLED to write in response to a multitude of readers stating that storylines should be removed from games. I agree when it comes to games like *Tony Hawk's*, but what about adventures, FPSs and RPGs? These games require quality storylines if they're to keep me playing.

A good example would be the likes of *Final Fantasy X*. Despite being fairly basic, the characters and storylines drew me in so much that I was compelled to put the hours into completing it. I now find myself delving into the *Final Fantasy* back catalogue, and I'm currently finding *VII* and *VIII* equally superb.

Compare this with *Oblivion*. It may be lovingly crafted and superior to all *Final Fantasy* titles in terms of sound, graphics and gameplay, but it hasn't stopped me losing interest. This is because the game and its main characters have all the personality of a paper cup. After trying several times to get into the game, I've finally given up. Underneath its beauty is a dull world and a boring plot, and it simply doesn't have the humour or storyline needed to give it that vital staying power.

"STRICTER LAWS ON THE SALE OF VIOLENT GAMES COULD INTRODUCE A NEW GENERATION OF GAMERS TO THE DELIGHTS OF ICO AND OTHER ORIGINAL GAMES. THIS CAN ONLY BE A GOOD THING FOR THE INDUSTRY"



Are games like the acclaimed *Metal Gear Solid* franchise overloaded with plot…



…or do the *Final Fantasy* titles show us how vital a decent story can be?

Making Contact

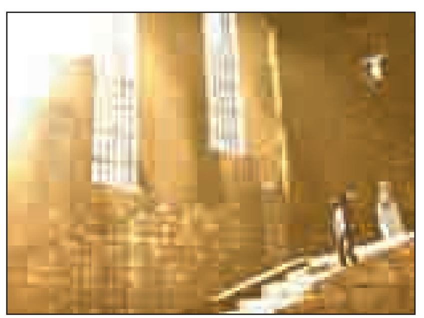
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A violent games ban could bring new, young audiences to games they would otherwise ignore, like *Ico*.



The *Resident Evil* games are tame by the standards of contemporary releases like *Manhunt*.

To me, this clearly demonstrates that storylines are actually becoming more crucial to single-player videogaming, and should be concentrated on more than ever.
John Bilcliff

games™: Your point is relevant up to a point, John, however, all of the examples of great storylines that you give are from RPGs – possibly the one genre that demands an in-depth storyline. That the titles you mention are among the finest RPGs ever released makes the claim even more tenuous. Illustrating how some RPGs have good stories and some games don't isn't the same as proving that story is now crucial to all single-player gaming.

The fact is that for every great game story – they do exist, we'd never deny that – there are ten with a tacked on and contrived mess in place of a plot. This is most prevalent outside the realms of the RPG, in genres that really don't require much story to be entertaining, yet still force you to sit through reams of cut-scenes introducing poorly defined character after poorly defined character. General industry practice still doesn't accept hiring a genuinely gifted writer as necessary to the creation of a game, and as talented as most developers are, they're not all the next Charles Dickens or Dan Brown.

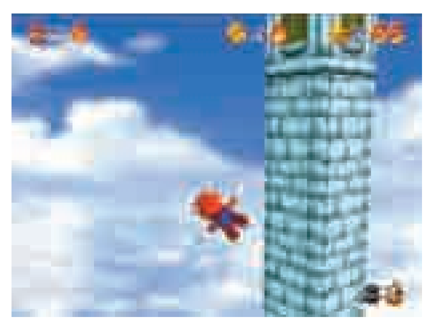
We talked to the team behind *Kane & Lynch* recently, and when asked questions about the gameplay – how many team-based levels, what countries the game spans – we were often greeted with a reply of, "It's dictated by the story." They were adamant that every event in the game was subservient to the plot, but for our money that claim seems erroneous. In order to be a videogame, the plot has to be packed with set pieces, action, tension and the sorts of moments that make good levels. *Kane & Lynch* isn't a moving tale about two gay convicts and their secret love for one another, because that story would make a poor videogame. Narrative should always be at the service of gameplay and not vice versa. After all, if *Final Fantasy XIII* were written by Martin Amis but played like crap, it would still be a bad game.

ISSUE 46 WAS something really special, mainly thanks to the interview with Jack Thompson. Before reading the article I'd only heard exaggerated claims of how he wanted to destroy the videogame industry. How wrong I was. I found myself agreeing with many of the points he made about violent content in games and how children under the age of 18 shouldn't be exposed to it. I myself played violent games when I was younger, but *Resident Evil* is a far cry from the violence in games such as *Manhunt* and *GTA*. From my experience working in retail, it was somewhat disheartening to see young

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Enough of what we think, this is where you lot get to show off your rapier wit to praise, criticise or mock the games industry. Or not…



Advances in technology paved the way for milestone games such as *Super Mario 64*.



Last issue's beat-'em-up feature received both praise and interest from a lot of very happy punters. We do it all for you.

kids asking their parents for 18-rated games – which the parents seemed to buy despite staff advice – and passing up games like *Final Fantasy*, *Metroid*, *Mario*, and *Zelda*. Stricter laws on the sale of violent games could introduce a new generation of gamers to the delights of *Ico* and other original games. This can only be a good thing for an industry that's quickly stagnating with cheap *GTA* clones.
Stephen Fagan

games™: The world of gaming is very closeted and sometimes snobbish. Debate of violence, sexism, racism and other such issues are keenly encouraged in other media, yet in gaming – perhaps the medium that needs such discussion the most – disparaging comments are often met with two fingers stuffed in the ears. Thompson has made some provocative statements – although we are aware of the media's tendency to quote out of context – and so the games press has every reason to try and find fault with what he says. Thompson is no great lover of gaming, but that's his personal opinion and he's entitled to it. All he expects of others is to take the necessary precautions to ensure that inappropriate material doesn't fall into the hands of minors. Spitting vitriol back at those who dare suggest our industry isn't perfect makes us the villains, not them. If videogames are ever to be taken seriously, we must start to take it seriously.

I'VE REALLY ENJOYED reading your **games™** Bible features – they're a great addition to the magazine. Is there any chance that you will branch out into some of the more neglected gaming genres? Adventure, for example? The Adventure genre includes many gaming gems, yet they are rarely successful at retail. There is small yet loyal support for the genre among a few developers, with recent and upcoming titles like Quantic Dream's *Fahrenheit*, Telltale's *Sam & Max 2* and Revolution's *Broken Sword 4*. The fact that a lot of gamers haven't heard or played titles like the great *Grim Fandango* is a great shame.
Matthew Mitchell

games™: Thanks for the thanks, Matthew. The Bible features have proved a rousing success, and rest assured there are many more to come. Luckily for you, we're a team of adventure fans going back to the heady days of the LucasArts' point-and-click classics, and with so many new additions on the horizon it would almost be rude not to. We won't tell you when though, it would spoil the surprise.

AN ARGUMENT I'VE heard many times, but never so often as since Nintendo's E3 conference, is that better graphics and more powerful processors do not equal more sales, or reach broader audiences. I applaud Nintendo's efforts with Wii, but I do support

Text Life

Great beat-'em-up article
g™: Why thank you, but please, no more. The author is starting to get ideas

Have you seen *Superman*?
g™: Wrong magazine, friend. Try *Empire*. And yes we have. It was good

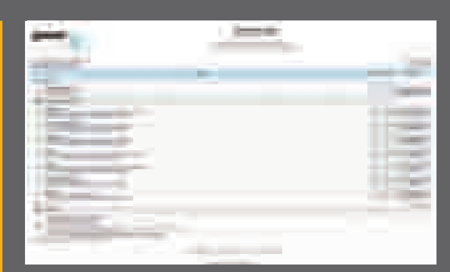
Where are all the good games?
g™: It's summer. Go outside, get some exercise. They'll be back in September

Which is your favourite LocoRoco?
g™: The red one with the moustache, though the black one's music is great

Sam and Max are back
g™: Possibly heralding a return to form for the point-and-click. Another *Monkey Island*?

I finished *Prey* in three minutes
g™: Yes, it was a touch too short, though that might be the price of ambition

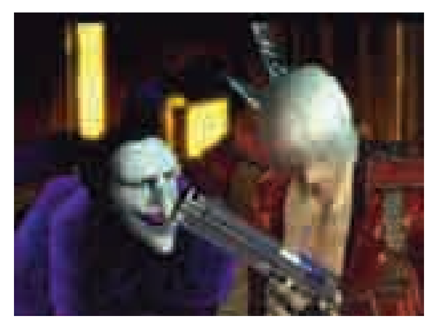
DS Lite is sexier than Angelina Jolie
g™: There is so much wrong with that statement we don't know where to begin



For all your games™ forum needs, point your browsers to… www.gamestm.co.uk/forum

FROM THE FORUM

WHY BUY A PLAYSTATION3?



New instalments in classic series such as *Devil May Cry* make PlayStation3 a most tantalising prospect…



…although innovative games including the stunning *Okami* suggest that the current generation isn't on the way out just yet.

Microsoft and Sony's goal of more powerful hardware. Where would we be without the hardware race? Still playing *Pong*, that's where.

I love *Pong*, but I also love *Super Mario 64*, *Halo* and *Oblivion*. None of which would have been possible without such processors. You see, better graphics DO equal better games. Obviously, gameplay is paramount, but the technology afforded to us through next-gen hardware give us more immersive experiences. Maybe one day the millions of non-gamers out there will welcome it into their lives when what they're playing is graphically closer to real life. When they can live *Lost* and not just watch it.
David Cook

games™: Perhaps a better way of putting it would be, better graphics CAN equal better games. Unfortunately, there are just too many releases that assume that great graphics can make up for deficient gameplay. Technological advances have allowed games to evolve and improve, but as long as developers remember that games aren't films – so no ultra-realistic *Lost* tie-ins please – the way we interact with games will evolve, not just the way they look.

I WANT TO thank you for the fantastic article about fighting games in the latest issue. As a fan, it was surprising to read such a well-informed article. I haven't seen another gaming magazine in the UK show the rest of the uninformed audience what kind of tournaments and players we have, and you certainly did your research. I've been meaning to tell DSP about the article, but I fear it may boost his ego even more than required. Many thanks for finally giving the dying scene the attention it deserves.
Michael Edwards

games™: The fighting games article got a massive and overwhelmingly positive response, so thanks for your kind words. Many out there wouldn't have been aware that such competitions still existed, but we urge you to take a trip down to your local arcade. Let's see if we can't get the whole scene moving again.

"I APPLAUD NINTENDO'S EFFORTS WITH Wii, BUT I ALSO SUPPORT **MICROSOFT AND SONY'S GOAL** OF **MORE POWERFUL HARDWARE**. WHERE WOULD WE BE WITHOUT THE HARDWARE RACE? **STILL PLAYING PONG**, THAT'S WHERE"

lagunaloire77
Let's face it, half the people that save up for one will be told their 'pre-order' has been put onto the second list. It'll be several months before the quality games arrive, by which time the price will have gone down. PS3 will no doubt have some amazing games over the next few years, but there's no harm in waiting. Besides, with games like *God Of War 2*, *Guitar Hero II*, *Okami* and *Final Fantasy XII* to look forward to, there's life in the PS2 yet.

toneeblair
Without an HDTV, I have no need for any Blu-ray player, never mind a cheap one. None of the games announced instilled any kind of excitement, and the motion control looks awkward and possibly painful over time. I have a 360, and will be getting a Wii… so until there's a significant price drop bringing it to around £100, as the PS2 is currently, I wouldn't even consider getting one. The other two consoles will provide me with all my entertainment needs.

Bob Syko
Metal Gear Solid is one of the reasons I'll be buying a PS3, not that I'll be buying one at launch. The PS2 didn't work properly at launch, the games are always disappointing or utter rubbish, and at that price I could save starving Africans or buy a couple of houses for them or something. I'd feel bad paying that much for what is going to be this gen with better graphics for a long time, until they realise they can do more with the power they have.

ZappyMcZap
I'm confident it'll still be the best-backed console with regard to publishers. It'll no doubt get the most Japanese-developed RPGs, then factor in the big guns like *Devil May Cry* and *Metal Gear* and I'm sold. People may knock Sony as a company (and justifiably to a degree), but I still think PS3 will kick serious ass – as will Xbox 360 once developers get to grips with it, and Wii in its own quirky little way.

Noize
One thing big boys Sony and Microsoft don't take into account is that developers and publishers want a big user base so the sales potential for any game is bigger. We've heard a lot over the last few years about how important the casual gamer market has become to videogame companies as this means a lot of money in additional potential customers. By putting out consoles at high prices, the casual-gamer market is ruled out from the start. Prices will drop over time and attract more people, but the higher the original price the longer it will take to drop to a level reasonable enough for common mortals to want to invest in one.

9

Out of ten

